

# tabletop GAMING

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## EXALTED FUNERAL

How the indie games publisher exhumed the golden age of RPGs

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Shadow Collective  
Painting Guide

## 3000 SCOUNDRELS

We get the exclusive on this weird wild west game

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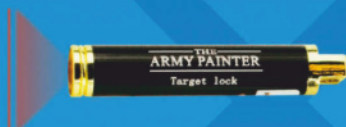
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**Land of Eem from Exalted Funeral, art by Justin Gerard**

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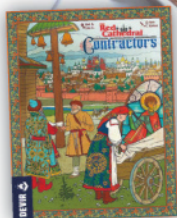
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# Welcome



**NOW  
PLAYING...**  
*Red  
Cathedral:  
Contractors*

This issue we're going to the moon, back to Anglo-Saxon England, the weird wild west, a completely fan generated world and the home of the modern indie RPG scene without even taking our foot off the gas.

But first of all we're popping in to check out the whimsical world of *The Land of Eem*, a roleplaying game that's pitched as 'The Muppets meets The Lord of The Rings'. It's entirely as charming as it sounds. Which leads us to our Studio Profile of Exalted Funeral – an example of when you want to order a few copies of a game for your buddies and it gets so out of hand that you're now running huge Kickstarters. Plus, they might be the nicest people in the business.

Speaking of getting out of hand, we chat to the creators of a *Gloomhaven* fan game that's ended up being three quarters the size of the original. And, with something of an exclusive, we reveal Corey Konieczka's newest game – *3000 Scoundrels*, which you think would be a few too many. This is the designer's most 'Euro' game, although, he somewhat rejects the label. Turn to page 50 to find out more.

Plus, it's a bit of a bumper solo issue with reviews of *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Apawthecaria*, and a guide to playing any RPG solo. Other reviews include *TUSK!*, *Key to the Kingdom*, *Meeples & Monsters*, *Long Shot: The Dice Game*, and many more.

**Christopher John Eggett** Editor

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## QUICKSTART

“I think we tapped into the vein really



**Matt Kelley on the expansion of  
*Exalted Funeral*, p36**

“Everything is two sided, I think that's important in this design



**Haakon Hoel Gaarder on designing  
*Moon*, p30**

“It was very difficult when I was developing this game to really, make sure that the bluffing worked regardless of who was playing



**Corey Konieczka on *3000 Scoundrels*, p50**





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# AT A GLANCE

## LESS THAN 100 DAYS TO TABLETOP GAMING LIVE 2022

The hit gaming convention run by the teams behind Tabletop Gaming and Miniature Wargames magazines is now less than 100 days away, and there will be 100+ games to play when you get there. The show, running for two days over the weekend of the 17th-18th September 2022, brings together gamers from all across the country – for the first time in Manchester. The show is taking place at Victoria Warehouse, Manchester, in the historic Cotton Sheds, and is sponsored by local hobby titans Steamforged Games, who will be demoing *Bardsung* and showing off upcoming titles. Fanboy 3, who have been at the heart of the Manchester Gaming scene for years, will be showing off some of the biggest publishers from the US. They are joined by Manchester indie legend Hall or Nothing – who will be showing off new titles like the historical battler *1815: Scum of the Earth*, and Manchester's biggest gaming group Tabletop Manchester. New games at the show include: *Bardsung* (Steamforged Games), *Amelia's Secret* (Hachette Board Games UK), *Star*

*Wars Villainous: Power of the Dark Side* (Ravensburger), *Call to Adventure: Epic Origins* (Brotherwise Games) and *Cartaventura Caravans* (BLAM!).

Roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty with our workshops – learn how to make your first game with James Wallis (*The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen*), create an RPG in an afternoon with Chris McDowall (*Into The Odd Remastered*) or make your own miniature with Kit-bashing YouTube star Bill Making Stuff. With hands on games demos and events happening all the weekend at stands – and dedicated workshops too – making it a huge weekend of gaming where you can get stuck into the hobby like you never have before. Use the QR codes and links to get tickets now.

### WORKSHOPS



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## YU-GI-OH CREATOR KAZUKI TAKAHASHI PASSES AWAY

The creator of much loved Yu-Gi-Oh! Has passed away. The series began life as Manga, written and illustrated by Takahashi, before becoming a media franchise that include the still popular *Yu-Gi-Oh! Trading Card* game. Whilst not directly involved with the card game, his characters have been brought to life on many duelling tabletops, having recently celebrated its 20 year anniversary. Takahashi, was reportedly working on the original story for the upcoming Yu-Gi-Oh! The Dark Side of Dimensions animated film, and working on a new anime series at the time of his passing.

## KNOW YOUR NUMBERS

**100** years of lunar colonisation in *Moon*

**4** The number of ZineQuests when including this year

**9 BILLION** Pokémon cards printed last year

**21** years of ENNIES Awards

**6** years from idea to reality for musician Frank Carter's card game *Halves*

**3** new packs available for *Fluxx*

**40** years of *Call of Cthulhu* (and an anniversary starter set to celebrate)

**2** new games announced from Pandasaurus for September

**80** Plastic haunted carriages in *Ticket to Ride: Ghost Train*

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**tabletop**  
GAMING



## NOMINATIONS FOR TABLETOP GAMING AWARDS 2022 ARE NOW OPEN



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TTGAwards22

It's that time of year again, we've opened our nominations for the Tabletop Gaming Awards 2022. Last year 1500 readers nominated and voted for their favourite games of the year. The eligibility period is between September 2021 to September 2022, and includes categories like Best Board Game, Best Way To Die In An RPG and Best Indie Game. Plus, we've added an additional category to account for trading card games. Once nominations have closed, we will pick the finalists for the final vote. So follow the link here or use the QR code to nominate your favourites.



## We asked...

The great thing about board games, is often portability. All we need is space to play, a table and chairs if you're feeling fancy, and some fellow gamers for the perfect time. Where you place that table though might change – do you play at home, at a local game store, or somewhere entirely different? We asked you your thoughts.

## You said...

St Albans Board Games Club – friendly people wide selection of games played from High Frontier to Tokyo Highway in its tenth year with over 500 members many of who have become my friends.

**Matthew West**

Finchley Games Club

**Cole Leadon**

Anywhere where we have good players, the coffee is hot and the cake is scrumptious.

**Jeff Stokes**

Anywhere we can sit around a table and snack!

**Thomas Luke Bel**

Entoyment Wargaming and Hobby Store. Amazing place with 20 large tables (6x4) good food and with a great community in tow

**Lee Rattew**

The Role Play Haven – fun, safe, gaming.

**Garry Harper**

At home or at a friend's, but outside that I used to like Bean Gaming in Leicester.

**Charles Pritchard**

## Get in touch



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## FREE RPG DAY AHEAD

Just a day after the magazine you hold in your hands goes on sale, is the annual Free RPG Day. Having already taken place in North America, due to logistical challenges, other locations are able to enjoy it on 23rd July 2022 instead.

Free RPG day offers a wealth of free adventures, resources, previews, and/or accessories for the budding RPG player, and you can enjoy this at participating Friendly Local Game Stores (which can be confirmed online). Publishers taking part this year

include Darrington Press, the publishing arm of Critical Role, who have offered a one page RPG of magical familiars on a mission, created by Marisha Ray (Critical Role) and Grant Howitt (*Spire*). Loke Battlemats, who have offering a ready to roll 5E Adventure including battle maps and tokens, and many many more. If you're looking for something new, or new to RPGs in general, this could be the perfect opportunity to get involved.

## ZINEQUEST RETURNS

January this year saw a surprising disturbance in the usual order of things, where the annual Kickstarter ZineQuest, traditionally taking place in February, was confirmed at the last minute to instead be taking place in August. The move upset indie RPG creators, who cited a reliance on an off-season boost in finances, lack of regard and lack of warning, and indeed, a counter effort saw the creation of ZineMonth, a movement that effectively recreated the February event over multiple crowdfunding platforms. However, beginning August 1st the original ZineQuest is taking place. Kickstarter have since confirmed that for 2023, the event will return to February.



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## A CASE FOR MORE DUPLICATES

Alex Livingston, the author of novel *The Knave of Secrets* introduces us to the idea of duplicates in hobby gaming

Words by **Alex Livingston**



**T**he balance of luck and skill obsesses us. In many games, the best players are those who put themselves in situations where luck is on their side – where more rolls of the dice or drawn cards are more likely to help them than harm them. But what if you eliminated luck completely?

I feel justified in assuming that most readers find that the combination of careful play with the (limited) whims of chance makes for a great night of gaming. Many of the Whist players of yore (and the bridge players of today) felt differently. While the rules of whist eliminate much of the luck of earlier trick-taking games, like getting points for simply having been dealt a face card, how can you really say who is the better player without leaving it the fall of the cards? *Maybe she's just lucky. The cards love him. If I got cards like that....*

Hence the invention of Duplicate Whist.

In duplicate, your total score is based not simply on wins, but on how well your score for a hand compares to that of the other players for *the exact same hand*. Got a miserable deal? Doesn't matter – a bunch of other players got the same one, and you managed to eke out a trick more than anyone else, garnering yourself some points. And that magnificent

hand you grabbed nine tricks with? Well, someone else snagged ten.

Each table at a duplicate event has one deal of four hands, and the players rotate through. Could the duplicate concept be applied to contemporary tabletop? If your gaming group has a favourite, could it be used to see who is the better player once chance is removed?

*Coup* comes to mind as a game to which the duplicate approach could easily be applied based strictly on wins. Say you had three tables of three players each. Take three *Coup* decks and keep track of their order. Label the seats A, B, and C. Each player is assigned one of the three letters, and at the end of three hands – each at a different table but with the players in the same assigned seat – compare the number of wins for the players of the same letter. Maybe someone managed a win with an Ambassador and Contessa when the other two players of the same letter didn't – and got credit for it.

With *Coup* the individual players' decisions to draw or not would change which cards were available for the players in different hands; if I switch out and grab a Duke, there's no guarantee the person in the same seat next hand will do the same. The same concern presents itself with a deck-builder like *Star Realms*.

This is the blackjack problem – “you shouldn't have hit, and that seven should be mine” – and could be a frustration for the strictest competitors, but (barring any high-stakes underground *Coup* rings) it would likely add more conversation and interest to the post-game analysis. “Oh, I decided to go for Blob, so that Mech World didn't come up on my turn” etc.

Dice rolls could be static as well, if you'll pardon the oxymoron. Roll a few hundred times or have one of these new-fangled computers do it for you, keep the list, and use it for each game. Printing up a bunch of domino cards would serve equally well. (For

an impassioned treatise on dice rollers, I recommend the eXtreme gammon FAQs. It gets heavy.)

This approach could be applied to many games, of course; let's look at the space sandbox *Xia: Legends of a Drift System*.

For a duplicate *Xia* tourney, the order of the tiles and the card decks would be preset by the organizer. These would be the same at each table, as would the stack of “dice roll” cards. How did you do against a player with the same starting ship? You may have lost the game, but if you came out with the highest score among the Easy Tiger players, you could still take the tourney.

The duplicate approach could really shine with single-player games (or SP variants). A *Nemo's War* challenge in which the order of ships coming out of the bag and adventure cards drawn is preset would lead not only to serious bragging rights, but to a detailed review of every single turn. Why did one player choose to attack a frigate when another turned tail? How did that impact the rest of the game?

Duplicate could bring a different level of scientific play to the games we love, and more importantly would prompt a deeper understanding of the mechanics through conversations with friends about the choices made. Not that I would turn down the bragging rights, of course. ♣

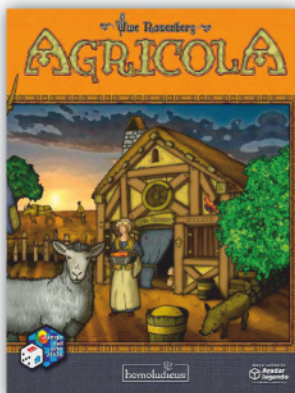
### ABOUT ALEX LIVINGSTON

Alex Livingston grew up in various quiet New England towns before moving to Buffalo, NY to study English at Canisius College. He lives in an old house with his brilliant wife and a pile of aged videogame systems where he writes SFF prose and interactive fiction. *The Knave of Secrets* (Solaris, June 2022) is his debut novel.



## 1 AGRICOLA

Are animal meeples meeples too? We think so, but this is one of the tough moral questions posed by this farmyard mogul simulating classic. Starting from humble beginnings players must build up their farmstead and create a future for their family, and their tiny wooden animals. Create pens to contain your flocks and herds – and watch your empire grow. If your fellow farmers don't get in your way. *Agricola* is a satisfying example of the 'block the worker placement space' game, with the twist of progressively improving spaces over the span of the game. A classic for a reason.



## 2 ROOT

A clash of woodland clans which is most often admired for its asymmetrical play. Each faction has its entirely separate way of playing the game from the Eyrie (the bird faction) that's playing a run of cards, the Marquise de Cat playing a classic build-and-expand game while the single meepled faction of the Vagabond is kind of doing a Robin Hood act. The meeples are all printed with lovely details giving them all the character and life of illustrator and artist, Kyle Ferrin's artwork. When it comes to warring with little wooden soldiers in the woodland, there's little better:



# 10 OF THE BEST GAMES WITH MEEPLES

While the humble meeple may have come into existence (in name, at least) in *Carcassonne*, we've come a long way since. If a worker needs to be placed, it's usually a tirelessly working meeple that comes to your aid. We celebrate our favourite games which use those little wooden people, animals and dinosaurs in clever or beautiful ways.

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**

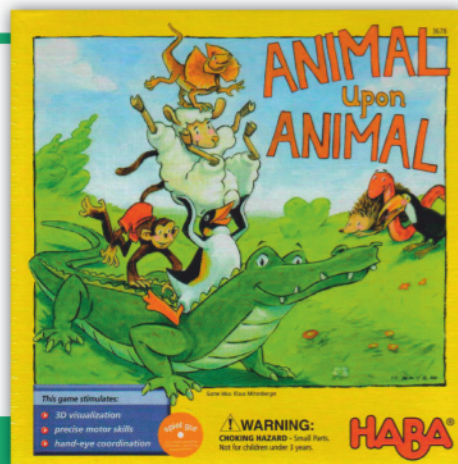


## 3 COLT EXPRESS

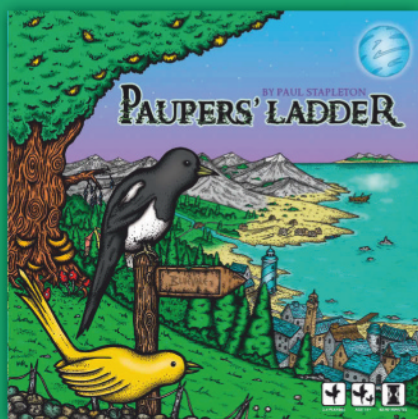
This is a robbery! Well, it might be, if you can get everything to work out in order. A classic Spiel des Jahres winning game of action programming. Players are controlling law-breaking meeples across a '3D train' by playing a series of cards in order – blind to others around the table. These are then resolved in order, often with hilarious results. Naturally, the inability to react and have to watch a kind of slow-motion farce roll out in front of you is both excruciating and deeply funny (really depends if it's happening to you or not). Oh, and of course you can shoot each other.

## 4 ANIMAL UPON ANIMAL

The classic stack-em-up of, again, meeple animals. This runs from ages four plus, so there's an argument that this is more of a toy than a game – but what a lovely one it is. It's also a rare sighting of the snake meeple. The game consists of stacking animals, and if you drop any pieces during your animal placement, you have to pick up two to return to your hand. Simple stuff that makes it a family classic which has lasted the test of time. For adults who find it too easy, chuck in a few limiting factors like time, closing an eye or using your off hand to even things up a bit. It might be trickier than you think.







## 5 PAUPER'S LADDER

A small indie game about virtuously collecting bits and bobs until you get crowned the new monarch. An interesting game for the way that the world undulates as you play it. For example uncovering a monster

in one area might see your opposition for the crown either rush in and kill it for the glory, or avoid the area entirely. Charmingly rendered in a lumpy style by Paul Stapleton, the game's designer, its major contribution to meepledom isn't that there's loads of them, but the ones you do get are massive.

## 6 MEEPLE CIRCUS

Roll up, roll up, the circus is here

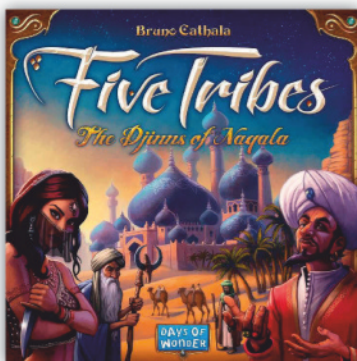
– and recently reprinted. *Meeple Circus* is the game of putting on a top notch big top act – use the elephant, horse, strongman and generic meeples to put on the show of the century. The promise of the game is that you'll be doing what everyone does at the start of a worker placement game – stack your meeples – but this time you're doing it to get points. Simultaneous building, and rules around making sure every meeples is holding something makes the puzzle to get the most points out of your troupe trickier than you expect.



## 7 FIVE TRIBES

Camels, trees, and the odd building here and there. It's also another great Bruno Cathala game – maybe *the* great Bruno Cathala game to some. The

turn order track is the star of this show, despite the 90-odd meeples in the box, with options to pay more to go first each turn being the knife-point on which the game balance. Otherwise it's a case of move a meeples, and take all of that matching colour – claiming the tile if you clear it too. For those who like a bit of abstract area control in their puzzly games, this is a classic worth seeking out.



## 8 TERROR IN MEEPLE CITY

Previous versions of this game had a

more direct name, that of *Rampage*. And those that immediately think of the arcade game from the 1980s, you know what's coming. Players are big meeples monsters trying to smash a city made up of layers of cardboard and meeples like a delicious and terrified Mille-Feuille. Flick discs, drop your monster in a satisfying WWE body-slam kind of way, and generally mess up the city until your monster's appetite is sated (hint: it's the end of the game).



## 9 EVERDELL

For the expanded meeples universe (which when you take the expansions into account), this might be the premiere moose outing. Played in the shade and between the branches of the huge Evertree (it's a

big cardboard tree) players are doing a bit of worker (cute animal meeples) placement, town tableau building and prepping for the next season. We gave it a Must-Play on its release, and we're still very much fans of the roots it's set down in the hobby.



## 10 MEEPLES AND MONSTERS

Reviewed later in this

very issue (p72) this bag building meeples militia marshalling game sees players adding meeples to their bag to fight monsters, upgrade towns and investigate the world around them. If you're a fan of bag building and worker placement this is a winner – but more importantly, the sheer joy of having to grab a fistful of meeples from a bag is worth it alone. After all, don't we all regret having to place our workers and just leave them there?





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# Role Call

We're reliving the 80s in ROLE CALL this month, with new RPGs from both *The Terminator* and *Blade Runner* hitting the shelves soon Words by Richard Jansen-Parkes



## BLADE RUNNER – THE ROLEPLAYING GAME

Explore the dark and moody world of *Blade Runner* with a brand new RPG from the folks over at Free League. This licensed game promises to throw players into the boots of trenchcoat-clad Blade Runners – bounty hunters tracking robotic 'replicants' – in the neon future. Expect a beautiful book and solid rules.

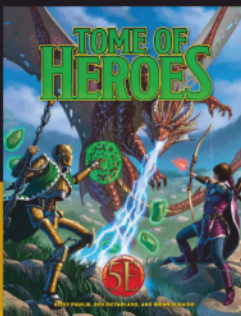
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Get ready to battle the robot menace at the tabletop (before we need to do it in real life) with this nifty adaptation of everyone's favourite Arnold-based blockbuster: *SLA Industries* promises innovative mechanics pulled from the *Terminator* universe, such as replacing dead characters with versions pulled from different times.

SLA Industries | £40



## TOME OF HEROES FOR FIFTH EDITION

Kobold Press have been doggedly pumping out sourcebooks for *D&D 5E* since its launch, and this latest expansion focusses squarely on the heroes at the heart of any campaign. *Tome of Heroes* promises an incredible 70+ new subclasses for the game, as well as more than 20 new races.

Kobold Press | £39.99



## DWARROWDEEP

Claiming the rather unique titles of "the single largest dwarven themed adventure in the history of role-playing games," *Dwarrowdeep* is a truly gargantuan megadungeon. It promises to be stuffed with enough old-school adventuring material, maps and monsters to keep your game going for several years, and we believe it.

Greg Gillespie | £29.99



## WARHAMMER FANTASY ROLEPLAY – WINDS OF MAGIC

If magic always comes with risks in the world of *Warhammer Fantasy*, this has to be the most dangerous sourcebook going. This comprehensive guide to the arcane is crammed with new spells, new magical careers and new enemies to battle. Just try not to explode when you use it, okay?

Cubicle 7 | £39.99





HAVE YOU PLAYED? ★

# RA

Are you bidding to find an auction game that everyone might like? Look no further than Ancient Egypt

Words by **Chris Marling**

**A**s a board game mechanism, bidding sits firmly in the Marmite category. Any game with an auction becomes immediately divisive for many groups, with some players simply refusing to play them. So, it is possible for these opposites to reach their hands across the divide and find a common game?

Let me – or rather designer Reina Knizia – transport you back a few thousand years

to Ancient Egypt. Picture yourself as a major political player trying to expand your fame and influence. Over three epochs you'll influence powerful Pharaohs, build incredible monuments, collect gold and take advantage of the Nile's bounty while advancing the knowledge of your civilization. All while avoiding disasters such as droughts, earthquakes and civil unrest.

But most importantly of all, you'll curry favour with the gods. The likes of Anubis, Seth and Horus can help you tactically outmanoeuvre your opponents. But invoking the mighty Ra at exactly the right times will lead one player to the ultimate victory.

## WHAT IS IT?

Ultimately, this is an auctions game. But the way it limits bidding is where *Ra* finds its crossover appeal. Over three rounds, players slowly collect a variety of tiles. Each type of tile will score in different ways – some having one-time abilities, others scoring once before being discarded, and others continuing to be useful throughout the game.



Player turns are very fast, making it scale nicely right up from two to five players – although it's generally considered best at three or four. On your turn, you decide to either add a random tile (from a bag) to the current offer – or start an auction (by theatrically shouting, “*Ra!*” – well, you do if you're in our group...) for what is already available. This decision is sometimes simple, but often more nuanced.

First, you need to consider each player's current bidding potential. Depending on the





number of players, you'll each start with three or four sun (read: bidding) tokens. Once an auction begins, each player can bid one of their tokens in a once-around the table auction which ends with the player that called it. So as a rule, if you have weak tokens, you don't want the offer to get too tasty – as you'll be unlikely to win it. If you end up with eight tiles in the offer, an auction will be automatically triggered.

Second, you need to analyse the actual tiles that are available. Who needs what, and how badly? All of this is open information, and the tiles are bright and colourful, so it's easy to see all the information you need. Even if there are only a couple of tokens – even one – in the offer, does someone want it badly enough to use a token to take just a small reward? Or does the presence of a particular negative tile (which usually destroy a few tiles you've already taken) rule some people out of this next auction already?

Finally, weighing up how far through the round – and game – you are, can be crucially important. A round can end after all players have used all their bidding tokens (once out of

tokens, you sit out the rest of the round). Or if a certain number of Ra tiles have been drawn from the

bag, depending on player count. This adds a fantastic push-your-luck element to the game, especially if you're the only player left with bid tokens and there's only one or two Ra tiles left before the round ends. How far are you willing to risk it? Because if that last *Ra* tile pops up, the round ends automatically and you get nothing.

When you do win an auction, you must take all the tiles that were in the offer. You also put your winning bid token onto the tile board and take the one left by the player who won the previous auction. In this way, each player gets a new set of tokens to bid with next round – or score if the game is about to end. All the bidding tokens are unique (numbered 1-16), and a good set can make all the difference. In a round where *Ra* tokens are coming out fast, shortening the round immensely, it's not unusual to see a player call an auction simply for a strong bid token – before any tiles have even been drawn from the bag.

## WHY SHOULD YOU PLAY IT?

*Ra* is a push-your-luck set collection game, where the timing of the acquisition of tiles is decided by the players. When you have a chance to buy, you get one shot at making an offer for what's available – and you do so with the full knowledge of what the other players have in terms of bidding power and desire. It just doesn't really feel like a traditional auction game. It's as much about deduction and reading the table as it is about anything else. Put simply, it's competitive and interactive fun in the ways a traditional family game should be.

You won't find many games published as early as this (1999) in the Board Game Geek Top 200 games of all time, but *Ra* is hanging in there. And it also ranks in the top 150 strategy games, while probably being the highest ranked pure auction game on the list. And Reina Knizia's reputation speaks for itself, with him generally considered to be one of the best game designers of all time.

Holding on to this level of reputation in a business constantly screaming for the new shiny cannot be overlooked. It only takes an hour to play, is quick to set up, looks lovely on the table, and gamer kids as young as ten won't have any issues learning it. And who doesn't want to stand up and shout "Ra!" while banging a chunky wooden god statue on the table? 🗡️



# The Soloist

## IT'S ALL IN YOUR MINDSET

We explore the world of solo gaming one move at a time  
This month: solo roleplaying mindset

Words by **Geek Gamer**

**A**lthough it may seem as if solo RPGing was invented as a response to pandemic social isolation, support for solo RPGing came right at the beginning.

Gary Gygax created rules for “solo dungeon adventures” in 1975. Back then, the thought was that people would play solo if they couldn’t find a proper group, or perhaps as GM prep--and so it probably was. Yet solo rules continued to appear, in various forms, throughout various early editions of the original role-playing game.

There’s much to be said about solo RPG - so much, in fact, that I’ve written an entire book

about it (*Solo Game Master’s Guide*, Modiphius, 2022). Here, I’m going to give a brief overview of what a solo RPG is, and discuss three central mindsets that a solo GM should bring to the table for maximum enjoyment. (Overall, I’ve identified 10 mindsets of solo GMs and you can read about the rest of them in my book.)

### WHAT IS SOLO RPGING, ANYWAY?

Like a “regular” RPG, solo RPG is game storytelling. It’s creating a simulated world, putting characters in it, and conducting actions that progressively reveal a story organically through gameplay. Often (but not always),

dice mechanics are central to the fiction that emerges. Yet some solo RPGs such as journaling or writing-based games may not involve dice at all. Solo RPGs differ from conventional RPGs in one significant way: a solo RPG is creating a story with the help of RPG rules, conventions, and randomizers where you (the player) act both as the GM and the player.

The goals, rewards, and experiences of the solo GM and player are not the same as that of other GMs and players, nor are they trying to be. Having the proper mindset when sitting down to a solo session will greatly improve your satisfaction. We’re going to look at three of these mindsets now.

## THREE GREAT RPGS TO TRY PLAYING SOLO

### SCARLET HEROES

*Scarlet Heroes* by Kevin Crawford (2014). This versatile RPG, designed to support classic sword and sorcery adventuring with a lone hero (with or without a GM), contains a meaty section on solo gaming. In one book, you’ll find all the rules for playing the game, creating a world in the Red Tide setting, managing magic and monsters, as well as numerous oracles for solo play. These include random tables for urban, wilderness, and dungeon adventures. “Adventure tag” tables let you easily flesh out stories with enemies, friends, complications, and objects. If you’ve never done solo RPG before, this book is your best bet for one-stop shopping for everything you need. As an added benefit, most of the oracles and random tables in the book’s last section can be used with any other rule set to support solo RPG sessions.



### IRONSWORN

*Ironsworn* by Shawn Tompkin (2018). The dark fantasy setting of *Ironsworn* comes alive in this flexible RPG. Created to support three types of play--guided (traditional table top with players and a GM); co-op (you and friend(s) banding together to overcome challenges in the world); or solo (you play a lone character fulfilling quests in a dangerous world). This game presents a rugged and treacherous setting at the end of the world where your character fulfills quests. Heavy on theme and emotion, the main rule book comes with numerous oracle tables to support solo play, as well as a bestiary and all rules for character and setting creation. With a storytelling focus and an emphasis on portraying a lone hero



**MINDSET 1: everything is playing.** If you are involved with an RPG rule set in any way, you are playing. Creating a character but never using it in a session is still experiencing an RPG world. That is playing. Acting out combat scenarios with pre-generated characters is playing. Choosing random trinkets for a character and creating a spell is playing, even if that's all you do.

One of my first attempts at solo RPG was to use the original *Traveller* (Game Designer's Workshop, 1981), and create a starship. I labelled a ship's map and used random tables to imagine places it would go. That's it. I never made characters. I never sent the ship anywhere. But I was playing an RPG, and it was great!

**MINDSET 2: words, not die rolling, should get you through narrative transitions.** In solo RPG, the biggest challenge is the moment you need to transition from being a player to being the GM. These are generally times we reach for dice. For example, consider this question: "Can I or can't I scale this wall without being seen?" It's tempting to roll on an oracle table and get an answer like "Yes, but..." or "No" (or some such).

Imagine instead that you answer the question this way:

**Look.** What's around? How high is the wall?

**Feel.** What's the wall made out of? What skill level would be needed to scale it?

**Listen.** Do you hear others around?

**Think.** Is my character fit and healthy? Experienced in climbing? In a rush?

Answering these questions by thinking through what makes *narrative sense*, will yield an answer--one inherently organic to your developing story (in a way that a "yes/no" oracle answer never will be).

**MINDSET 3: play emotion, not mechanics.** Story hangs on emotion. The more emotion, the more story. When sessions fail, it's because they didn't draw you into the story in an emotional way.

Focusing on the *feeling* of a situation or place (rather than the game mechanics of it) will inject narrative direction because feelings are what make you want to know what happens next in a story. And wanting to know "what happens next?" is a goal of effective sessions.

Consider these different designations of a forest: it's an *eerie forest* as opposed to a *magnificent forest*. These descriptions provide entirely different *feelings* about the place -- and nothing has even happened yet. Or imagine encountering an NPC who is *tense* versus one who is *animated*. These descriptions set the scene for two very different kinds of encounters.

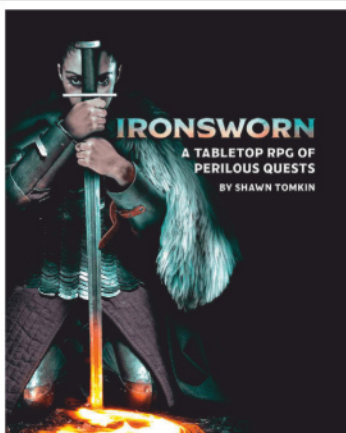
Feelings can be injected into every story part by the use of evocative adjectives. Doing so is a simple yet effective strategy for maintaining emotional pull.

In essence, the challenge for the solo RPGer

is to both distance yourself from the gameplay at the same time as you are immersed in it. Approaching the table as a lone gamer with the proper solo GM mindset is your strongest tool for creating and maintaining that childlike place of wonder and pure play to which all serious gamers aspire. 🎲

## ABOUT GEEK GAMERS

Geek Gamers is the host of YouTube's premier solo RPG channel, "Geek Gamers" ([www.youtube.com/c/GeekGamers01](http://www.youtube.com/c/GeekGamers01)). In the "real world," Geek Gamers has a PhD in Victorian literature, and is a book editor. She is the author of *Solo Game Master's Guide* (Modiphius, 2022) and *Wanderings: A d88 Gothic Roll and Read Table* (90th Street Productions, 2022) as well as various articles about wargaming, modernist literature, and book publishing.



in a harsh land, *Ironsworn* enables dramatic storytelling. Combine with *Ironsworn Delve* (2020) rules for in-depth dungeon exploration.

## SYMBAROUM

*Symbaroum* by Mattias Johnsson Haake and Mattias Lilja (2019) is a traditional (non-solo) RPG. The core rule book contains a rich setting, player's guide, game master's guide, as well as one adventure in 260 lavishly illustrated pages. You'll need to stretch yourself as an RPG soloist to work with the rules. They contain no oracles or random tables but do have extensive lore about the game world, evocative and moody art, as well as narrative-based presentations of 30+ enemies. Start by reading about the world of *Symbaroum*, and study the map of Davokar. Imagine your character setting out from one of the detailed villages and towns and encountering one of the pre-generated NPCs. Let your imagination take you on a simple journey north, encountering some enemies along the way. With some basic randomized rolls (1-5 on a d10 = no and 6-10 = yes) you should be on your way to creating a solo story with this rule set.



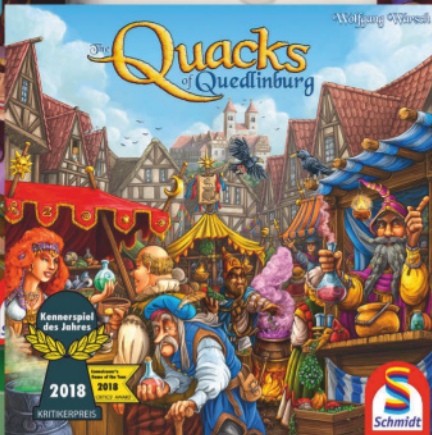
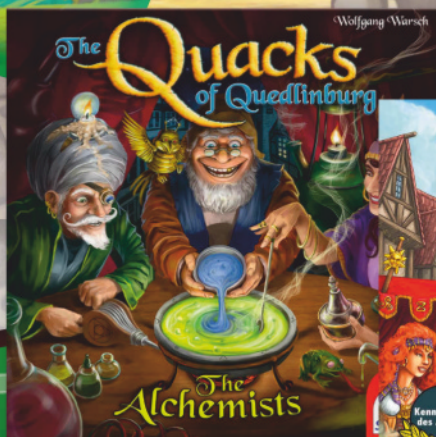


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my favourite game

# ALAN GERDING

One  
half of Two  
Rooms and a Boom  
tells us why Plato 3000 isn't  
a rum job

**O**bscure is an understatement when it comes to Sheamus Parkes' *Plato 3000*. There's something about finding a rare gem of a game that makes us feel a stronger personal connection. Often, I hear the classical brag that someone was an early adopter of something before it became 'big' as though this claim of being an 'original gangster' somehow makes their enjoyment more valid than any others.

Regardless, the feeling is real, an enhanced relationship to something that somehow feels more personal to you because the larger populace has yet to discover it.

I was a playtester for *Plato 3000*, or *Utopian Rummy* as it was called before it was published by Cambridge Games Factory. My first copy was the one I downloaded from email. I printed the game on regular flimsy paper, diligently cut out each of the 50 plus cards, and then placed them in cards sleeves in front of regular playing cards. Everything about this game seemed homemade. Every person with whom I played knew, upon first glance, this was not a game purchased at any store. Yet, by the end of our game, they were shocked they could not yet buy *Utopian Rummy* anywhere.

Why was this game so loved by me and all those with who I played? I think it may have been a perfect storm of nostalgic familiarity, innovation, and personal ownership. The core mechanic of *Plato 3000* is the same as the famous set collecting game of Rummy – a popular favourite among the common playing card games. Yet, *Plato 3000* expands upon the classic in such radically wonderful ways without betraying the classic feel of its ancestor. This makes it readily accessible to anyone familiar with it, while introducing more modern mechanics, such as engine building. As you collect and play a set of matching cards, you (as the player) get

game-breaking powers, allowing you to bend the rules of play. In fact, most people describe *Plato 3000* as 'Rummy, but with powers.'

This game's mechanics are relatively simple, yet seemingly infinitely variable. This gives players the sense of personal ownership of their decisions. The entire feel of *Plato 3000* is something easier experienced than it is to explain. Why? After a few games, you feel your ability to control the outcome grow. Losing rarely feels humiliating as much as it feels like a learning experience you will apply to the very next hand. Often you debate whether you should safely 'go out' as quickly as possible, or risk creating more sets for more end-of-round points. *Plato 3000*, to me, is the epitome of the recurring phrase, 'just one more game.'

When the game received publication, the art by Steven Gagatzky was next level. Each card was given a retro-futuristic steam punk theme based upon a classic job. If you collect and play a set of Fishermen, you not only get the ability to draw an additional card each turn, but you are greeted with the beautiful depiction of a steam-driven paddleboat, trimmed with brass filigree, and piloted by a fish themselves. If this sounds like a colourful hodgepodge mix of elements, you are not wrong. And it works so fantastically I often catch players staring at the card art noticing something previously missed.

If you are reading this and are even slightly curious, I can't recommend you try to find a copy of this out-of-print game. To add to the elusiveness of this hidden gem, its splendour is contained within a meagre and deceptively simple tuckbox. I'm fully confident you and your friends will be asking, "How have I never heard of this game" while also repeating the phrase, "Just one more game." 🎲

“ I think it may have been a perfect storm of nostalgic familiarity, innovation, and personal ownership ”



# LONG LIVE

# THE KING

We get to grips with becoming the boss of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**

**T**he Anglo-Saxon king was referred to as the Bretwalda – the ‘Britain-ruler’ (or, alternatively, ‘wide-ruler’ – which is slightly less straightforward). And he’s dead. Naturally, when something like this happens, we get a little bit of unrest in the muddy lands of Northumbria, Mercia, Wessex and East Angles – the four biggest kingdoms of Britain. Someone has to be king after all, and why shouldn’t it be you?

*Bretwalda* is a tactical area control game from Phalanx, inhabiting that classic ‘war on a board’ space that many of us love. We spoke to the game’s designer, Leo Soloviev, about creating this game of clashes in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom.

## ARCHITECT OF A KINGDOM

Soloviev was an architecture student – “however, instead of becoming a building architect, I decided to become a game architect.”

“I am just starting my career in board game design,” he says, “*Bretwalda* is my first project to be released, so readers are unlikely to be

familiar with my name, but hopefully that will change after *Bretwalda*.”

Like many game designers, the desire to create something came from hacking something they already loved.

“I started my path in game design by creating with some friends a home rule set for *Game of Thrones Second Edition* before moving on to original projects. These were interesting but complex and probably not publishable. Then in the summer of 2019 I started working on *Bretwalda*.”

Soloviev says he came to the modern board game scene “late” – by which he means at the end of high-school – but to many that’s early enough, as many gamers have a break until their twenties. It was only after *Game of Thrones* that he started to become interested in area control games.

While Soloviev started out as someone homebrewing a fantasy world, his interests were much more grounded in the familiar territory of publisher Phalanx, that of history.

“I have always been fascinated by historical strategy games. In elementary school, I discovered the computer game series Total War, building kingdoms, empires, and playing

epic battles – that was it,” says Soloviev, “then I started collecting figures from the *Lord of the Rings: Strategy Battle Game* system, as a teenager I played a lot in tournaments, once I even managed to win the Polish Solo Championship.”

## SUTTON WHEN?

“Since I was a child I have been fascinated by the image of the Sutton Hoo helmet. As an 11-year-old I once even drew a fantasy warrior wearing this artifact,” says Soloviev.

The Sutton Hoo helmet is the classic image that many associate with the period. A helm that functions as a crown (for King Rædwald, an East Anglian king) and a piece of armour.

“Awareness of Anglo-Saxon culture has always been somewhere in my head,” Soloviev tells us, “in 2018, the computer game *Thrones of Britannia: Total War* appeared. I spent many hours playing it – I think that was when the first seed for the game *Bretwalda* was sown. If I remember correctly, the idea of the game itself started with reading the Osprey book *Anglo-Saxon Thegn* while travelling by train. There is a map of England from around 800AD in the publication, and I immediately started to sketch my first illustrations on it.”

This sketch led to further research, and being drawn in by the aesthetic of the period.







"I was captivated primarily by the visual magic of the world of Anglo-Saxon England, its material culture, the combination of Germanic elements with Celtic aesthetics, and the fading heritage of Rome in the background. A great cultural mix, settled Anglo-Saxons, native Britons pushed to the frontiers of the land, loot-hungry Vikings from the east, Frankish missionaries, Irish monks writing holy books. In addition, the ongoing dispute between the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms over who would claim the title of *Bretwalda*. It was crying out to be turned into a game."

As always with games like this, we like to ask if we're in danger of learning something the

about history of the

subject. This is less an academic game than a taster – albeit one that fully assaults you with its lush visuals.

"The game's task is to introduce players to the world of Britain from the beginning of the ninth century. The starting point is historical – and during the game certain period-specific events take place, such as the Vikings' raids – but it is the players who decide how the fate of the land will unfold," says Soloviev.

"*Bretwalda* is not a narrative or roleplaying game, so it won't tell the story itself. However, it offers a rich, historical backdrop and will encourage the players to write their own story."

## WHAT IT TAKES TO WEAR THE CROWN

But how then does one become the Anglo-Saxon king? Like most games, it does come down to points – but it's about how you get them.

"The object of the game is to get a certain number of Dalcs – Anglo-Saxon brooches that were once a symbol of power and status," explains Soloviev, "players can earn them in three ways. The first and the most common one is to take control of the areas where the Dalcs are located. The second is to build abbeys in your kingdom. The third is to write a chronicle of your deeds."

These are all carried out by taking actions fit for a king. Development actions let you upgrade your actions and build building likes abbeys. Collection is the 'tax them' action (as well as harvesting food), and the classic 'muster' action is called 'Fyrd' – the term for a 'bring your own weapons' militia. And of course, movement allows you to take control of new areas – or start a fight – depending on how close you get to someone. Players will be taking two of these four actions per turn, "so each choice is crucial."

And while the game might offer these tougher choices, the rules are simple – and Soloviev wants to create a very fast-paced game. 📌





# BRETWALDA



"From the beginning, my assumption was that the game should be relatively fast and accessible. The key is clear, intuitive rules and a system calibrated to minimize player downtime," he tells us.

Of course, not every kingdom is the same. *Bretwalda* offers each leader a certain amount of asymmetry – whether that's through the locations they start on the map, or the kingdom rules (like getting bonus food in East Anglia, or more recruits in Mercia).

"There is no one path for each kingdom, the adopted strategy depends on the player, the choice of his or her ruler and the actions of other players; the choice of strategies is very wide," says Soloviev.

There's also a solo mode of the game in the works, "we are still working on it, but the main theme of the solo mode is

**“I was captivated primarily by the visual magic of the world of Anglo-Saxon England”**

to score a very high number of Dals over 12 rounds," explains the designer, "it is a logic puzzle with imposed time pressure."

Adding things like this takes a lot of development work. While much of the game was playtested over 2020-2021, Phalanx have stepped in to add further tweaks.

"In the last nine months, based on extensive external tests, together with the publisher, we have introduced a number of changes so that the game becomes even better," says Soloviev, "I'm now confident it can compete in the market with the best area control games. My observations have been that people appreciate the pace and intensity of the game the most, and that every choice matters."

The game itself looks incredible. The Gamefound page shows off the beautiful carved-looking 'pawns' to show the placement of your leader, troops and so on, and the board is presented in lush and textured detail.

"I am the author of both the mechanics and the visual setting of the project. As a game architect, I have to be responsible for the function and form of my creation," says Soloviev, "the main conceptual assumption of the project was to create a game that would give the impression that the game actually came from the period. I believe that historical games should be written in the language of their time."

## WHAT'S NEXT?

Soloviev has plans for more games of the same vein – in the sense that they're going to be more civilization-building war-orientated historical area control games. He claims that there are 16 new games in his head, but won't decide what to complete until the *Bretwalda* campaign is finished.

"Some of the designs are more advanced, and some are just a sketch of the map and the cover of the box – I always start with this," says Soloviev.

*Bretwalda* has fully funded on Gamefound. 🎲





# the independent shelf

## CRYPTIC EXPLORERS

Survival is anything but black and white

Words by **Charlie Theel**

**C**ryptic Explorers has been through a lot. It took three crowdfunding campaigns and several years for Tempest Tome Games to birth this black monstrosity, but it's been worth the effort. This one versus many dungeon crawler is inventive, wild, and tense in all the best of ways.

The setup here appears familiar at first glance, but that's not the case. One player takes on the role of a malevolent Goddess, selecting one of several entities to repel an elite team of invaders and protect their hellish dwelling. They command monsters of various strengths and capabilities, each unique to the asymmetric Goddess chosen. They enact power and dramatic effect through a deck of tailored cards, again specific to the being selected. Playstyles and strategies vary, offering many vectors to take up arms and spew venom into the faces of the interlopers.

Everyone else at the table plays the Cryptonauts, militant teams of explorers donning pressure suits and wielding high-tech firearms, ancient blades, and unwieldy spells. There are dozens of 'nauts to choose from and each player builds a small squad of multiple characters.

This is brilliant. There are natural synergies amongst various selections, and abilities often intersect in unique ways. *Cryptic Explorers* encourages experimentation and creativity by offering a wide range of personalities and



power profiles. Furthermore, this structure allows for character death without the threat of immediate player elimination. You may lose an officer or two, but you're likely to remain kicking with another explorer ready to scrape by and fight for their life.

These two sections of asymmetric variables integrate with a third – the Realms of Death. These are the four possible areas the Cryptonauts will invade, each a separate full-sized board with sharp ultraviolet glossy spot coating to catch the light. They are full of character, offering their own suite of terrain, special rules, and objectives.

It's pretty wild. On one map you will be excavating large tusks from a frozen labyrinth of dread, evading rotating statues that threaten to halt you in your steps. In another you're slugging through a bog and avoiding a hulking terror that's emerged from its sunken crypt. The imagination here is lovely, and the

environments are realised with oomph.

All of these variables form the scaffolding of a tremendously violent dungeon crawl. While you don't unveil new areas, there is an intense element of mystery as the Goddess player will manage threat to spawn new enemies and power her cards. Surprises arise as foes spring ambushes or trigger deadly traps. Your very surroundings encroach upon your existence and seek to snuff you out.

The arc of play escalates wonderfully. While pursuing their objectives, Cryptonauts will collect lost souls scattered around the map. These are used to unlock and power new abilities, as each explorer possesses several wholly unique powers you can attain. As the elite soldiers grow in capability, so does the Goddess and her environment. Everything builds towards a fantastic crescendo as blood is spilled and the protagonists either make it out alive by the skin of their teeth, or get slaughtered in a macabre carnival of blood.

This is a fantastic game that manages to utilise design principles found in the dungeon crawlers of yore, while establishing an intense personal identity that is unlike anything I've seen. There are moments where it feels highly restrained and edited – such as the simple yet effective dice based combat – and also moments where it becomes splendidly unhinged as creatures appear, spells are unleashed, and multiple bodies are felled like bloated pinatas. 🍌





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# ttg|2022







# FANHAVEN

**F**an projects are often really about paying tribute to something you love. Whether that's new characters, scenarios, games and so on – it's all about saying how much you loved the original. Most people who feel this passionately might create a few scenarios and share them on Board Game Geek. There's a line that gets crossed however when you've gone beyond homebrewing some rules and you're making a whole game that's two-thirds the size of the original. And when the original is *Gloomhaven*, you know you've really gone overboard.

We chat to the creators about putting together this mammoth fangame, now on its second printing, the generosity of *Gloomhaven* designer Isaac Childres, and how exactly *The Crimson Scales* got so out of hand.

## Who are you? Can you introduce yourself?

**Nick Sims:** We are a group of *Gloomhaven* fans who met on a Discord server for producing custom content. The main person behind the project is Motti Eisenbach, known in the *Gloomhaven* community as boardgame613. As well as designing several of the characters, he is the main person responsible for producing *The Crimson Scales*.

My name is Nick Sims, I'm from the UK and I joined the predominantly US-based team

a little later to build a story around Motti's scenarios. This is the first writing of this kind that I've done (I sell accounting software for a living!) but it's something I'd love to do more of.

Tim Tesstor used his professional graphic design skills to great effect to create new character cards, item cards and to lay out the rule book in an easily accessible way. Everything in *The Crimson Scales* has crossed his desk at some point.

The character art was commissioned from Alexandr Elichev. His work will be immediately recognisable, as he did all the art for *Gloomhaven*.

The people known as Dysent, Quasilocal and Disciple all contributed character classes, and many, many people have been involved in the hundreds of hours of testing that each character has received. It's been very much a team effort.

## What is The Crimson Scales?

**NS:** The *Crimson Scales* is an unofficial expansion for *Gloomhaven*. Set just after the original game, it contains 66 new scenarios and 11 new characters (with miniatures), as well as new items, monsters and conditions. It uses the map tiles, monsters and attack modifier decks from *Gloomhaven*, but it is not a small add-on; it weighs about 5kg and is about two-thirds the size of the original game.

## How did the project come about?

**NS:** There has been an active community of people making custom content for *Gloomhaven* even before the game came out. Isaac Childres made everything included in *Gloomhaven* free to use as long as no commercial gain is made under a Creative Commons licence and ran a contest to design scenarios following the initial Kickstarter.

Once the game was released and people realised the potential of the world, this community also started making custom characters. These go through a rigorous testing process involving countless hours of playtesting, including by playtesters of *Frosthaven*.

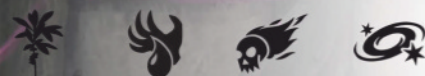
## Can you tell us a bit about how it grew to the size it is?

**NS:** I think it was mainly due to no-one saying 'Do you think we're getting a bit carried away here?'

It was originally intended to be a bit of fun and to be released online as either a print and play or on a Tabletop Simulator mod. However, as *Frosthaven* got delayed, and the pandemic gave some of us more free time we had an opportunity to do more. The motivation largely came from the *Gloomhaven* community though – as we started to post characters on BGG or TTS, people would give really nice feedback and ask if they could get







## What happens when a Gloomhaven fan project gets out of hand? Let's find out with The Crimson Scales

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**

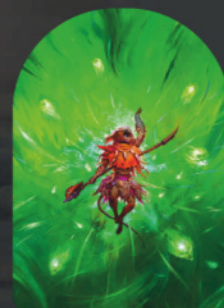
a printed version. Motti had commissioned some art and it seemed like it would be wasteful not to bring it to as many people as possible. From that point, it just snowballed – we originally had four scenarios, but we kept having fun and we had more stories to tell. Once it became clear that there might be enough interest to do a print run, there was no turning back.

Talk us through a few of the new mechanics and characters – what makes this 'new'?

**Motti Eisenbach:** The characters each take the original *Gloomhaven* player mechanics and add a new twist. For example, the Orchid Chieftain class is a summoner, but has the ability to 'mount' and ride around its summons. The Quatryl Bombard, surrounded by cannons, can shoot out delayed 'Projectile' attacks. Each class brings a new twist to the mechanical foundation laid out by *Gloomhaven* in a way never experienced before.

And what are you most proud of personally?

**NS:** For me it's simple – seeing a boardgame with my name on it has been a dream of mine for a long time. To get to do that within the world of *Gloomhaven* and with a great bunch of people has been incredible. 📀





# THE CRIMSON SCALES



This an 'officially sanctioned' expansion – if not official – how did you interact with the 'canon' of the world?

**NS:** For the characters, it was important to all the creators that they fitted with the races that Isaac created. We wanted to introduce new mechanics and roles, but still be true to the original canon - so you won't see the small but technically skilled Quatryls as tanks, or Aesther's forgetting their innate ability to manipulate the elements.

From a story point of view, the idea we always had was that we wanted it to be 'more Gloomhaven' rather than something new. That means that it takes place in areas that are familiar to fans of the original, and follows the same tropes (spoiler: the story opens when the party are approached in a tavern by someone shifty). It does contain a couple of callbacks to characters from the original too.

There's also a very neat appearance from a Frosthaven character – I asked Isaac about a particular role in Gloomhaven and he told me about this person – it'll be great for those who've played The Crimson Scales to see them appear in Frosthaven!

We're used to seeing fanmade expansion content in RPGs, but it's rarer to see it in board games – what makes the Gloomhaven world worth expanding?

**NS:** Mechanically, there are tools which make designing great looking scenarios really easy, and the card system that is used in *Gloomhaven* just has so many possibilities for character design. As for the theme, it's just such a great world to write for. The physical world is relatively familiar to most fantasy fans, but with these unique and interesting

races, and lots of room for creating fun and interesting characters within it.

Will people be able to complete this before Frosthaven lands?

**NS:** The original aim for The Crimson Scales was to give people 'more Gloomhaven' and some extra content before Frosthaven, so I hope people can finish it before the new game arrives. The first print run of The Crimson Scales is arriving in June, and I believe Frosthaven is currently due to ship in September, so it probably won't be delivered until October or November. That should mean that a committed group has time to finish it. We are doing a second print run too, so while that might arrive after Frosthaven, the characters are compatible with all official games.

What's next?

**NS:** During this project, we learned a lot about game design and development, not to mention sales, marketing, production and shipping – in other words, everything involved in being a board game publisher! We've decided to use our experience to form our own company – Addax Games – with our first game, *Rove*, heading for crowdfunding this Autumn.

We didn't want to stray too far away from what we knew, so *Rove* is also a thinky dungeon crawler, but is very much its own world, and with some unique mechanisms we're very excited about. We've brought in some new people, and The Crimson Scales team are back, including Alexandr Elichev. It's been great to see him create amazing artwork outside of the Gloomhaven world.

You can pre-order the second printing at [www.thecrimsonsscales.com](http://www.thecrimsonsscales.com) 🍷





# around the world in 80 plays

# JAMAICA

Words by **Chad Wilkinson**

**T**ravelling directly east across the Caribbean Sea from Haiti – the focus of last month’s instalment – sees us shortly arriving upon the shores of Jamaica. This

tropical, mountainous island was once home to the indigenous Taino people whose culture incorporated games such as the early ceremonial ball game batu, and the intriguing calf-slapping contest of makebari.

Less sport focused games were played by children, the most notable being guamajico. Utilising small seeds from algarrobo or guama trees attached to a length of string, players would assemble around a small circle, taking turns to swing their seed upon those of their opponents. Much like the familiar game of conkers, the winner is the player whose seed remains unbroken.

Upon the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1494, the indigenous population predictably began to dwindle as the island became home to the Spanish and later British colonisers, along with their African slaves. Whilst globally popular imported games such as chess, checkers, and various card games likely began to spread throughout the island at this time, it is the more distinctly Jamaican designs gradually coming to the fore which prove more interesting.

Around the 18th century, a game called Crown and Anchor became popular among British sailors and others on the island. This simple gambling game involves players betting on one of six spaces featured on the board before rolling three dice. Each die has facings depicting the four traditional card suits plus a crown and anchor. If the chosen symbol appears on at least one die, players win the bet. Contrasting with the game’s pared down simplicity, Crown and Anchor boards were often large, eye-catching centrepieces, brightly painted and patterned by the islanders to attract visiting sailors. Being a game of luck, Crown and Anchor proved to be a reasonably profitable endeavour for board owners.

This bright and bold board design is also



apparent in Jamaica’s love for the game of Ludo – locally known as Ludi – with most boards being homemade and hand painted. In 2021 Otis Nelson capitalised on his home country’s love for Ludi, incorporating variable, colourful designs along with Jamaican rules variants into a digital app format. *Ludi Clash* has since seen thousands of downloads, the revenue of which Nelson hopes to inject back into the community of his hometown.

Beyond games utilising a traditional deck of cards such as the rummy-style game Kalooki, Jamaica has shown a flair for creating more contemporary card game designs reflecting Jamaican culture. Party games such as *Yawd Cards*, *Bere Vibes*, *Guesswah*, *Speaky Spokey*, and *A Wey Yuh a Sey* have all been designed with a distinct focus on Jamaican vocabulary and dialect, providing an energetic means for families, friends, and emigrants to engage with their country and each other.

Charmaine Radway’s *Yawd Cards* were specifically designed to strengthen relationships between people spread across Jamaica and the globe, with further expansions from the *Date Night* edition taking this to a more personal level.

*Guesswah* arguably possesses the best production of the bunch with its included card dispenser, die, buzzer,

and curious chicken timer. Using two card decks, *Guesswah* follows a charades-style framework with ‘Say It’ and ‘Dweet’ cards respectively asking players to either describe or act out clues. Designer Patrice Johnson created the game shortly after her son’s autism diagnosis and, as such, has ensured the game is approachable, educational, and entertaining, alongside being inherently social. Through her Kingston based company IBI, Johnson also creates custom *Guesswah* cards for specific occasions and is currently working on two other upcoming games.

Jamaica’s tabletop scene may not be the largest, but examination of recent designs has demonstrated how countries can use games to celebrate national identity and culture in a way that brings people together. 🇯🇲

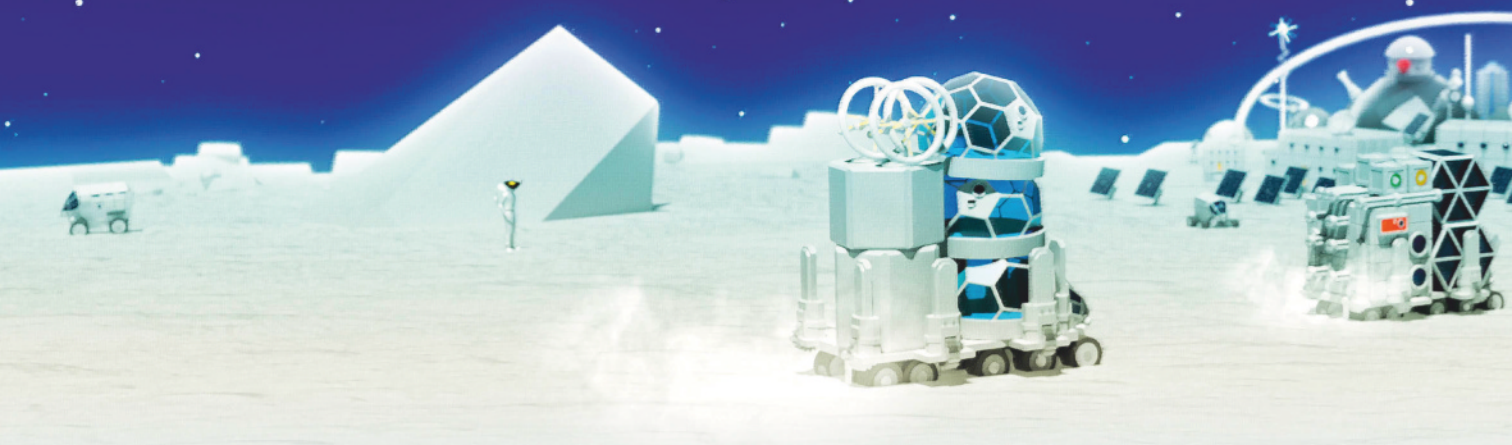




# ONE SMALL STEP

We're heading beyond the street and out of the village, with Moon

Words by Christopher John Eggett



**V**illagers and Streets are modern classics, both published by Sinister Fish a fixture of the UK independent game scene, and designed and illustrated by Haakon Hoel Gaarder. While the first two games in what we can't help but think of as a trilogy focused on the more mundane topics of medieval production and the flow of tenants around a city's accommodation the third offers us something with, er, less atmosphere?

*Moon* is a game about building a colony in space using the only way we can really see civilisation getting there – pick and pass. We sat down at Airecon 2022 with Gaarder to discuss getting the game into orbit.

## READY FOR LAUNCH

"The gameplay is a pick and pass game, but this one has enough new stuff going for it I think it's worth trying," says Gaarder in our first face to face meeting ever. This charming and slightly self-effacing approach is the standard mode

of delivery for the graphic designer, artist and game designer of *Moon*.

The twist here that put it head and shoulders above the usual grab-and-pass card game is the introduction of special 'leading' cards in each hand.

"We have expedition leaders. Each hand is like an expedition of 'space trucks' carrying buildings, travelling from base to base and dropping off buildings," says the designer "they each have a leader that has a special ability while you have that hand."

These expedition leaders offer powers like discarding a card from your current hand and replacing it with one from the current era deck (great to get rid of a card you know someone wants), buying space rover (the truck 'meeples' of the game), or just gain resources. Simple stuff, but powers that can really interfere with other player's plans, if you're paying attention.

"You can really exploit those and that's going to guide your play," adds the designer.

This is a kind of pseudo-asymmetry in the

game, you only have the player power while you're holding the hand, but it looks to lead you through the game.

"If you can remember the powers and plan for them, you can use that to your advantage the next time it comes around," says Gaarder.

## SPACE BASE

The meat and space-potatoes of the game however is the base building, which Gaarder compares to some Euro heavyweights.

"There's some elements here inspired by games like *Food Chain Magnate*, there are cards in the centre of the table that you can pick up if you achieve stuff – giving you new powers. It's a race to pick up these very powerful abilities, and it can become very asymmetrical," he says.

The game also includes some worker placement elements too, in the form of little space truck meeples. The previously mentioned 'rovers'.

"You have two trucks, which can you



# D FOR VILLAGERS



can use on other people's buildings to use them," explains Gaarder, "you only have two, but if anyone sends trucks to you, you'll get those later. So, if you create an attractive settlement people will flock to it, meaning you'll get to have more workers later."

This is a running theme through the designer's work – the interaction which is built upon from what people have built. In *Villagers* this was the use

of the neighbouring village's workers (which would give that player points at the end) while in *Streets* players fed off the very *Carcassonne*-feeling of taking someone else's street for yourself. At the end of each Era (of the three in the game) the space trucks are returned to the player who currently has them on their base. Gaarder's games always offer players a sense of cooperation, but within it, a cost or transfer of

some kind – you can be building upon one another's successes, borrowing from each other – but it's not until the scores are totted up that you realise that wasn't necessarily a fair deal. If you'd sorted out your own blacksmith for example, you may have won that game of *Villagers*. *Moon* promises to be much the same.

"You can just exploit their combo and jump right in," says Gaarder with a smile. ▶



# MOON

There are three card types in the game to build your base with. These are stacked in their colours on top of one another for a fairly tight tableau space (compared to the sometimes sprawling *Villagers*).

The yellow cards unlock other cards, and they're also points at the end of the game through set collection. Blue cards are the production cards, creating resources. And pink cards, which are one-time use cards, which can only be used once per era. The latter are the most interesting and often relate to the biggest swings.

"You can use it and flip it over – there's one called the Charger, which spends your energy resources. It scores three points per energy tokens. So, if you can amass ten energy tokens you can flip that card in round one and score 30 points – you can do crazy stuff like that," says the designer. This freedom to make big plays is also a feature of his work.

"Unlike other tableau builders where the tableau is passive, this one is quite active – you use the stuff in it," says Gaarder. The classic *7 Wonders* is brought up a few times – but *Moon* takes the shape of the civilization builder with a bit more weight. In fact, the designer considers this his heaviest game to date.

"Everything is two sided, I think that's important in this design," says Gaarder, "it's good to just collect trucks, but maybe it's even better to spend all of them."

## BLUEPRINTS

Once again Gaarder has created the graphic design, the artwork and the game design, "the advantage of that is that all those three things are intertwined in all games really," says the designer, "this helps me as the design can inform how the art should be like. It creates a cohesive whole when I do all of it."



As you would expect, there are clear goals and humour within the artwork. It takes a line from *Streets* in the sense that each building is designed to elicit a little chuckle from whoever is looking at it, while remaining totally readable.

"You have a humble beginnings theme in the first era, and it gets more and more advanced from there," says Gaarder, before giving us an example of the humour in the game "and one of the resources is 'bio' – like biomass, like dirt – and the way you get that is you build a toilet. And you get points for just storing lots of water, and it just looks like a giant water cooler."

These examples put us on track for the kind of light humour we can expect from the game once it's on our tables. The designer refers to the approach as "Hitchhikers Guide style, not serious sci-fi."

"I try to create art that conveys the mechanics," says Gaarder, "for the water cooler it's simply something that stores water, and then having a few people hanging around in space suits. I think that's the way it will go actually, everyone wearing spacesuits all the time, that way you don't have to deal with airlocks all the time."



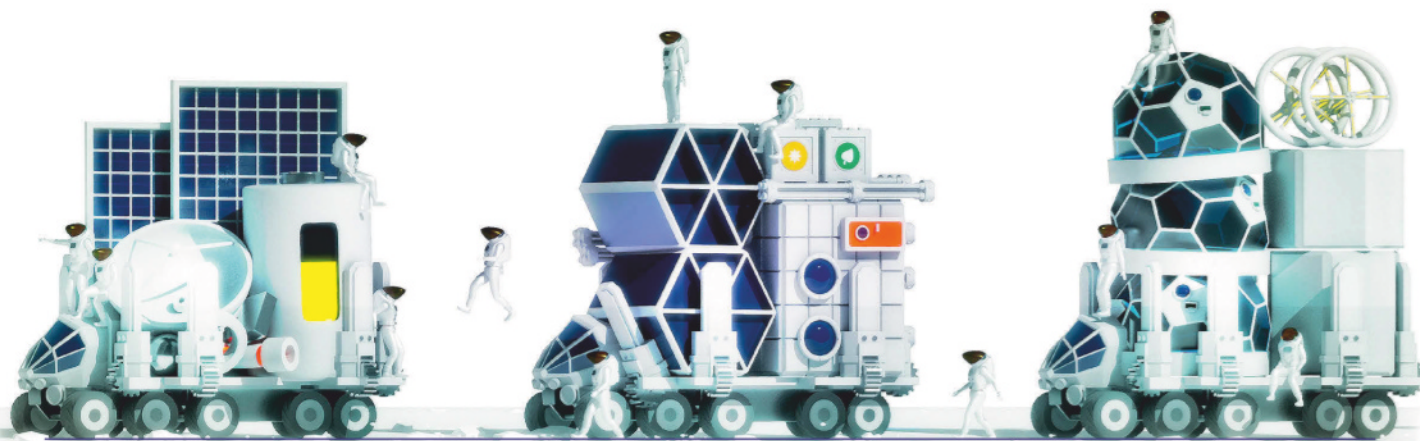
Which is what they do in *Galaxy Truckers*, after all – although that's considered to be because of budget constraints.

## WHAT'S NEXT

While Gaarder couldn't be drawn on what's coming next from him at the show – he does have ambitions to stretch his design muscles even further, although to what scale has yet to be seen. We asked Dave Clarke, the founder of Sinister Fish about what might be next for the designer, "*Villagers*, *Streets*, and *Moon* are more of a collection than a deliberate trilogy," says Clarke, "I suppose you could say that the three of them tell a story about human civilisation, but it wasn't planned that way. I think we'll probably stop at three and see what Haakon can fit into a bigger box for his next game."

Sinister Fish however are launching a number of games in the coming months, including the extremely exciting kids game, *Honk!* This is a surprisingly devious game of resource management and goose grabbing, with a lower age limit of 5+. Beyond that there's also *Great Scott!* Clarke's first game, "it was put together on a shoestring by me as a kind of proof-of-concept 'can I actually publish a board game' type affair. The jury is still out on that, and *Great Scott* is a very silly game, but it makes me laugh." The reprint is available now.

*The crowdfunding campaign for Moon is live right now.* 🚀





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# THE MUCKLANDS

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**

We learn the secrets of a new whimsical adventure game, *Land of Eem*, with its creators Ben Costa and James Parks

**“W**e like to describe it as, tonally, *Lord of the Rings* meets *The Muppets*,” says Ben Costa. Costa

and James Parks are the writer-designer duo behind the new whimsical roleplaying game, *Land of Eem*, to be published by Exalted Funeral (p36 for more about them) and currently funding on the new Backerkit platform.

“It’s a light-hearted – maybe rules light, it’s hard to determine, as there’s some procedural rules you could use or not – roleplaying game. It takes place on a hex map, which is a big part of the game, that you use to explore the Land of Eem.”

The pair are probably best known for their young adult graphic novel series, *Rickety Stitch* and the *Gelatinous Cube* and the recently released *Dungeoneer Adventures*. The former features a skeleton trying to work out who they are, after being resurrected by an evil lich. *Dungeoneer Adventures* is a story of the only human boy at a school for explorers. Both of these stories are set in the Land of Eem – a strange fantasy world that’s perfectly pitched for silly adventures.

## FROM EEM TO YOU

“It’s not just a system, we have a huge sandbox we’re working on – the first one is called *The Mucklands*, which is six regions – so there’s just a ton to explore,” says Costa, “we wanted to make a game that could actually feel like you’re exploring.”

A hexcrawl implies a lot more overheads than you might expect from a game like this. Usually you’re managing resources as a group, and with that comes starving, freezing, or generally being





# MUPPETS GO TO MORDOR

worn down by the world. When I ask whether the game is implementing an 'old school dying-in-the-mud' approach, I'm told it's a little bit softer than that, with a laugh.

"There is food, which needs to be accounted for, but we've tried to make that fun," says Costa, "we went kind of crazy with describing the wacky food. Aside from that it's fairly easy getting across the world. It's based on random encounters, and they're all more than 'you encounter four wolves' – they're actual situations that could really lead you on to side quests and derail what you were trying to do."

"Which happens every time we play," says Parks.

"And that's kind of the point of the game," says Costa, "you're always encountering ridiculous NPCs and it's assumed that you're thrust into the random encounter – rather than trying to go around."

As you might expect, this is not a combat orientated game, "personally, we find a lot of regular combat to be boring – I want to swing on chandeliers and convince the guard that 'its cool.' So, *The Land of Eem* is entrenched with making those other options and creativity the primary focus, rather than swinging your club around."

Mechanically, this is reinforced by the way encounters and combat is structured – players who want to talk go first, those who want to make a non-combat action goes second, if you want to run you go after that, and finally, if you want to fight, that the final action of the round. This 'let's talk about it' hierarchy for initiative pushes players to be creative, and stops the (sometimes amusing, we admit) players who attempt to hit something before anyone else has even opened their mouths.

The dice system is a simple one inspired by *Powered By The Apocalypse* – with a D12 system. The D12, the best dice, is used with a skill modifier to attempt to pass tests. 1-2 is a failure, 3-5 a "failure with a plus", 6-8 "success with a twist" and success and complete success beyond that. It's got a very 'yes and...' vibe to it, with players being encouraged to add their own twists to the game.

And this is all in the spirit of roleplaying that we don't actually discuss very often – and maybe it helps if you know your group really well – but it should be a silly and fun experience.

"We love the idea that there are big tonal shifts in a game," says Parks, "you've got these

everyday muppet characters who are just trying to make it work, but the world has a big range of challenges in it. And some of them are legitimately terrifying, there's 'Dark Lord' style scenarios in there."

"We have different 'tones' to play in *Land of Eem*," says Parks, referring to the pre-set ways to play – hijinks ("stealing somebody's mail"), daring-do ("something like the Princess Bride"), Doom and Gloom ("where's you're faced with a Lich"). Some might say that these are options for every game, but the guidance makes it.

"It stems from our work, and the stories we write," says Costa, "like Ricketty Stitch embodies that Lord of the Rings meets the Muppets vibe, he's a skeleton bard shoved into the middle of a conflict about good versus evil. So how he reacts to things is vastly different to that of a stoic hero."

"He's also a goofy character with a grim past," adds Parks, mentioning that he's a skeleton with amnesia that's been reanimated by 'evil-doers', "but he tackles 'life' like anyone would."

While the game might not be classically pitched, there are races and classes to have fun with. The classes aren't exactly 'off the shelf' however, Costa takes us through it, "there's the bard, and the loyal chum – which is based off the Gelatinous Goo character, the quintessential adventuring companion. We've got the dungeoneer, which reflects our series about a bunch of kids learning how to be adventurers, the Knight Errant – a sort of leader class, the rascal – a rogue style character. And the Gnome, the only class that is its own folk-species."

The gnome is the only class that is magical, "there's no wizard, yet" adds Costa, "the gnome is a wizard-ranger type, and we're really going back to the original gnomes. It's not like *D&D* crafty Gnomes."

"It's more like David the Gnome," says Parks, referencing a Scandinavian cartoon dubbed for English-speaking audiences from the late 80s-early 90s which causes such a powerful flashback to a forgotten part of my childhood that I have to immediately ask about whether there's an intentional nostalgia in the game.

"We love the aesthetic of your classic garden gnome," says Parks, "also the gnomes in the

*Land of Eem* are pretty powerful creatures.

Deceptively powerful cute creatures. We did the same thing with unicorns, they're kind of the Conan the Barbarian of unicorns."

Naturally, this softer aesthetic, nostalgia and simplified system makes it a great place to take your first steps into the world of roleplaying. *Land of Eem*, the pair say, is ideal for those who have never played a roleplaying game before – and that it's the old guard who have the most trouble adapting to the free-flowing play.

"The biggest thing we're bringing is providing tools for *players* to be creative," says Costa, "we went all out to give them class abilities that push players to create the world, because that's the way that we play. When I play *D&D Fifth Edition*, I get pretty bored with bonuses."

"Also, it's unashamed of being goofy," says Parks.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

The pair are working on their second Dungeoneer Adventures book, "and we're already starting out with the rumblings of the next *Land of Eem* sandbox content, we have such a large world that we have so much in the way of settings we can do," says Parks.

"We're expanding the game as we do more sandboxes," adds Costa.

Until then, everyone can sign up to get the quickstart, or back the game on the new BackerKit funding platform – the campaign is live right now. 🐸





# EXHUMED

We chat with two of the nicest people in the indie game scene and find out how their metal-adjacent online shop became the home of indie RPG publishing

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**

I start by asking what it's like to be a pretty big deal? Cristin and Matt Kelley laugh at the idea that they're any sort of deal at all. The pair seem constantly surprised with their position in the games industry.

Yet, Exalted Funeral is the go-to for many looking to pick up an indie roleplaying game, or publishing one, or getting their game into other players hands at all. Exalted Funeral has gone from an excuse to bulk-buy some roleplaying games that Matt liked into a fully-fledged cornerstone of the indie RPG scene.

"It's surreal," says Matt, "it's kind of odd that the trajectory of the business has gone from just selling out of our house for extra cash to being this... giant operation."

"Matt's job is the razzle dazzle – talking to creators, approving project, reaching out to creators of course," says Cristin, "and I tell people I'm the copy and paste CEO," before the pair laugh. Cristin is the logistical heart of the operation, ensuring everything that needs to happen, happens.

This kind of charming self-deprecation peppers a conversation that shows that the nicest people make the darkest looking and most 'metal' a reality. We sat down with the duo to chat about how it all came to be.

## BLACK LOTUS SEED FUNDING

"It started out with Sean McCoy of Tuesday Knight Games, and *Mothership*," says Matt, who read the game and immediately got in touch with McCoy to ask for ten copies, "he was still hand selling them out at conventions and such."

Matt and McCoy went back and forth over Google+ (the now defunct attempt at a social media platform from Google that hosted much of the indie roleplaying game scene before its demise) and began the process of getting those books out to more people.

"I was just hand picking certain games and certain publications I thought were cool," says Matt. Cristin tells us that part of the goal was to get international creators into the US – shipping

in a copy of *Trokia* cost as much as the book itself did – "it was always important to us to not change the RRP, so we'd buy in bulk to get the shipping price to a good point where it would still make sense. The whole purpose was to make the 'zines more accessible."

"Ordering quantities was kind of a leap of faith," says Matt,

"You know, everyone talks about print being dead and how everything's digital now – but we see something completely opposite," he adds, in an interview with a print magazine.

The actual reason the couple started the company was because Matt was thinking about their two children who, as other parents may be able to attest, "need a lot of stuff."

Initial funds for the company came from an amusing source, "I sold my entire *Magic: The Gathering* collection, my cards," says Matt with a laugh, "that's how I got funds to start. The time and funds to do something like a collectable card game dwindle very quickly when you have to pay for diapers and formula."





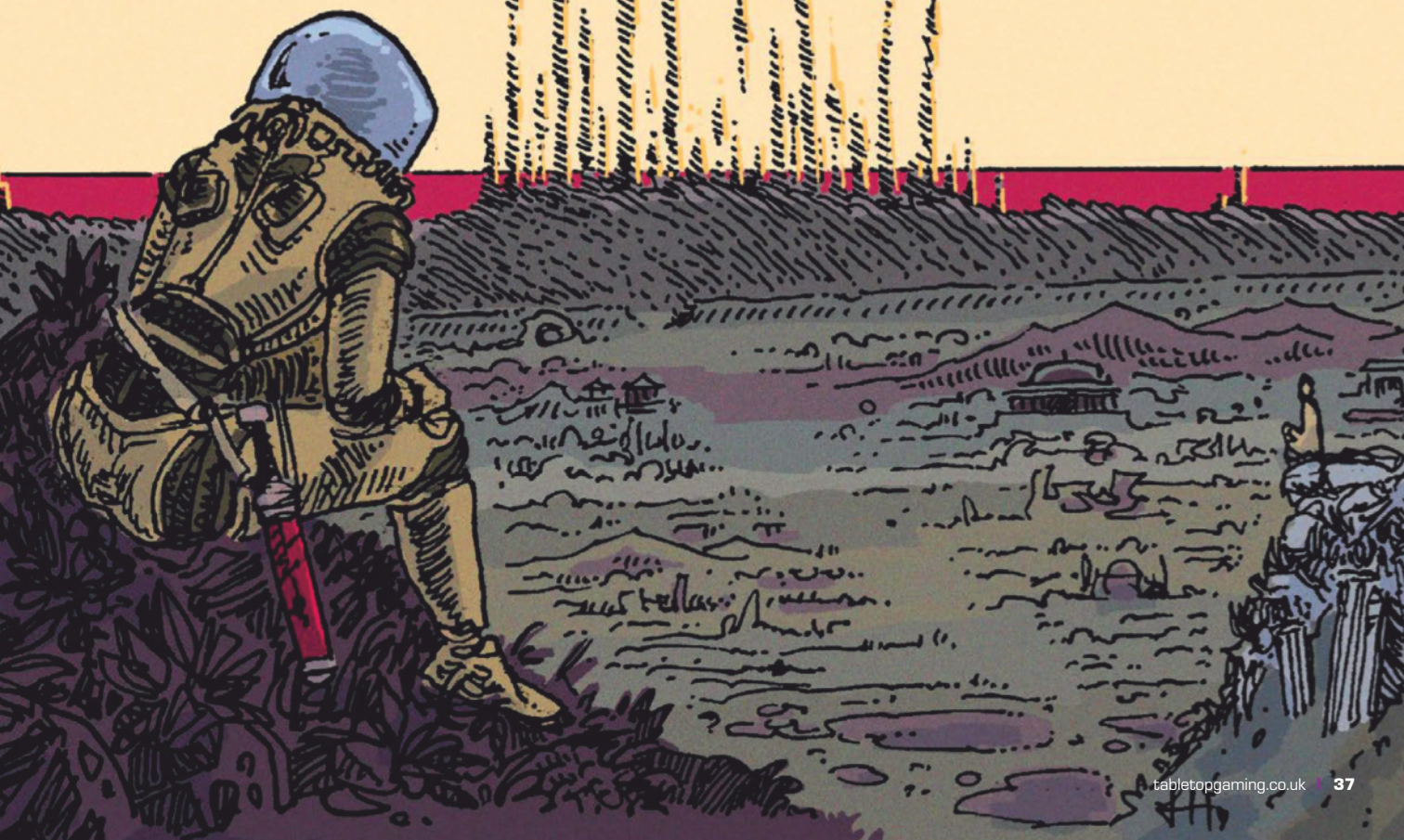


The store started out with Matt just selling through Instagram to begin with. Once the site was up and running, around the holiday season, it just took off. Every time the couple put together a five year plan they'd look around eight months later and find they'd already done it.

"Every quarter there is exponential growth," says Cristin, "we're constantly moving beyond capacity."

From the outside, it looks like Exalted Funeral are at the centre of this explosion

in indie roleplaying games. We suggest that they've done something quite big in the space - while there were always loads of people publishing their own games and selling them direct, it was fairly difficult to look at them all together. In the wake of the death of Google+, there was a need to centralise a lot of those lost connections. Matt and Cristin seem to have done that one email at a time, collecting and collating the best that the scene can offer. Similarly to *Knock!* a periodical





# STUDIO PROFILE: EXALTED FUNERAL



We also have a wholesale rep to get it in its physical form in multiple stores."

The company has been running for nearly five years. In that time they've set out a model for independent creators, and brought many, many projects to life. Cristin tells us about the number of times they've reached out in the hope of stocking a game, and finding that there's not enough copies left. While some would shrug and say 'call me when you do another print run'

Exalted Funeral seem more inclined to increase their requested number so that it becomes worthwhile creators going in for the second edition.

"It's a nice thing to be able to support creators," says Cristin, "we don't want to take advantage of anyone, and we want them to feel supported."

"A lot of people say this is the golden age of RPGs," says Matt, "because there's so many creators and so many people can make something. But no matter what the art form is, the distribution is a pain."

intended to offer a kind of preservation for "dusty internet pages," (as Olivier Revenu told me at Dragonmeet 2021), Exalted Funeral is a somewhat organic outgrowing of the community itself.

"I think we tapped into the vein really," says Matt, "you could see there's no distribution."

"When Matt pitched it to me, he said 'there's all these people on there talking about cool stuff, but it's just not affordable.'" adds Cristin, "so I asked 'what part, how much of our tiny house do we need to devote to this?' I'm the pragmatist."

"We do have a really good direct to print 'zine programme that our project manager Jared spearheads," she adds, "he contacts creators on [popular indie games site] itch.io to see if they want to get them into print – because a lot of time the games are not in print because creators don't have the funds.

Much of what Exalted Funeral do is take the pain out of putting games out there. Yes there's curation, but one of the biggest things they did at the start was free up creators to create – rather than packing, posting and promoting. Of course, for a pair of people who always just go that little extra step for whoever they're working with – if they believe in the game – the next step, naturally, is to just become a publisher.

## OUT IN THE ULTRAVIOLET GRASSLANDS

Much of what Exalted Funeral sell is a bit metal, but their first Kickstarter project was something a little different. Matt expected to be crowdfunding a long time in the future, but the opportunity turned up in the beautiful and weird *Ultraviolet Grasslands* and *The Black City* by Luka Rejec. This book, a kind of psychedelic Oregon Trail for adventurers that simply gushes style and charm, with its Moebius-like art style and strange, playful (nearly bashful) writing was the company's first Kickstarter.

"I just didn't want to pass up on the opportunity," says Matt, "because if we didn't publish it, someone else will."

The campaign brought in \$100,000+, and set the team on a course where they're regularly putting out crowdfunding for big projects.







*Ultraviolet Grasslands* was the point where the pair feel like they'd 'made it', "I'd always wanted to publish something," says Matt, "and I thought we'd get there eventually, but it came way early. That's when we weren't just a store anymore, we were a legitimate publisher."

"Although we still didn't have a warehouse then," adds Cristin, who, personally, packed every *UVG* box and folded every shirt for all backers in the United States.

"I mean *UVG* came to our home in a semi-truck. It's crazy because we needed, you know, \$40,000 of dice. All the suppliers are asking 'where's the warehouse?' and we're like, 'it's just our home.'"

They joke about having to tidy up laundry to take pictures of the pallets arriving, or clearing mac and cheese off the table after dinner to make room for packing and posting. It was after that first Kickstarter that the pair could quit their jobs and make *Exalted Funeral* a full-time gig. After that first successful Kickstarter the company was suddenly further

cemented as one of the central points of the indie side of the hobby. The store picked up and soon they were being approached by designers who want to be published.

After that, things got even bigger – with Gavin Norman, the writer of *Old-School Essentials* (a reworked Basic/Expert ruleset with classic dungeon crawling) reaching out to run a couple of Kickstarters with *Exalted Funeral*, the first pulling in \$291,000 and the most recent, a box set of pretty much all of it, hitting \$772,000 in funding. This brought in a different kind of gamer, those more interested in classic retro-clone gaming. Norman, wanted to just create – and this is part of what *Exalted Funeral* set out to do.

We asked Cristin and Matt to choose the book they're most proud of publishing.

"*UVG*. For the quality of it, I'm so proud of the way it turned out. It's printed here in the United States," says Cristin, "and I had the most contact with that game."

"Mine is probably *Old-School Essentials*," says

Matt, "because I think when Gavin [Norman] chose us it made perfect sense to him as we were already working together. But for the customers they were asking 'who?'. But all of those different people got exposed to loads of different games, with a whole different crowd."

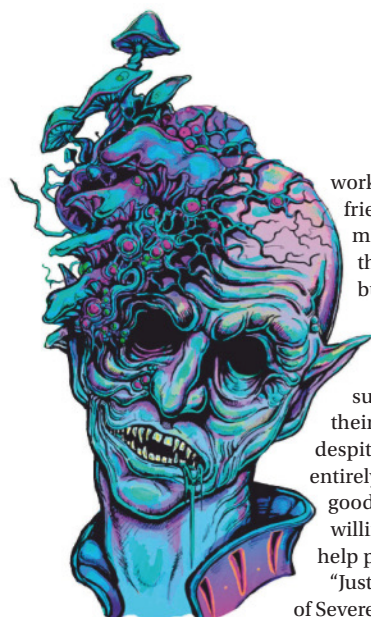
## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

"When we first started up our UPS driver was like, 'that funeral home is getting a lot of packages,' and had to be told 'oh no, they make weird books or something,'" says Cristin, which is not the only mistake that's made. The name, a Black Sabbath reference, has landed them with a number of catalogues for funeral home suppliers and crematorium kit. A bold prop for a games evening, but maybe a step too far – although branded toe-tags are mentioned.

The pair tell us a few stories about the, to them, unbelievable reactions people have to their stuff being out in the world. Cristin's brother calling from a farmer's market to tell them about someone stocking



# STUDIO PROFILE: EXALTED FUNERAL



work, or old friends suddenly mentioning that their brother buys tons of stuff from them. They remain surprised at their success, despite it being built entirely on their good natures and willingness to help people.

"Justin [Sirois], of Severed Books, was at Origins and said

how excited everyone was to see the Exalted Funeral banner," says Cristin.

"And I tell them," says Matt, "the emails they delete, it's on there."

When asked for a manifesto, they point to the Epic Levels's Andrew Bellury who recently created a tagline for them – "Exhuming the best in RPGs".

"And it's true," says Cristin, "everyone is digging on the team. Creators have always been the most important for us, as they're trusting us as a partner to help it come to fruition. I think it's like, supporting indie creators and making cool stuff. And just being genuine."

Discovery is clearly part of the mission for Exalted Funeral, helping people find new cool stuff (even down to the tags in the sidebar on the website) is what they do, even if they want to pretend it's about dragging skeletons out of the ground.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

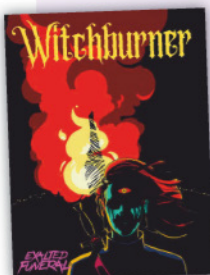
*Land of Eem* (p34) is live on the new Backerkit platform right now – an interesting move away from Kickstarter. The game is also one that seems only slightly out of step with the metal-and-metal-adjacent vibes of much of the rest of the catalogue. This is something that Matt worries about "some people are like, 'this is not on brand', but I'm like 'if it's good, it's good'".

The game is pitched as 'the Muppets meets the Lord of the Rings' – which, like all the best pitches, tells you whether you're going to buy it or not without even looking at it. While it might be a little tonally out of step, it's not too far really. A teased top secret project looks to set the company up in the vein of slightly silly outing.

Visit <https://www.exaltedfuneral.com/> to stay up to date with upcoming Kickstarters, Free RPGS and dig up some new stuff. 🍄

## FOUR OF OUR FAVOURITE EXALTED FUNERAL GAMES

*While it's honestly hard to pick our favourites from the entire catalogue of this indie publisher. They all drip with exactly what we like from our roleplaying games – brilliant ideas, peril and a whole lot of attitude. Nevertheless, here are some of our top picks.*

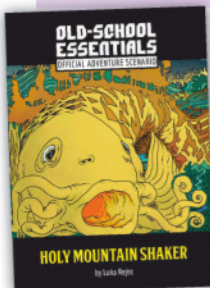


### WITCHBURNER

A 'social investigation adventure' that sets up the players as a team of witch hunters who have been hired to work out who the witch is in a small mountain village. Weird stuff keeps happening, and there's a lot of interpersonal strife to explore between the various peoples of the village. The book contains something like 30 NPCs for the GM to use towards the resolution of the story, and even a day-by-day events table to really ramp up the pressure. The game plays out a little bit like *Blood on the Clocktower*, if it was an RPG, or like a Free League cinematic scenario for *Alien*, if there wasn't going to be any acidic blood. An incredible adventure for groups who love thorny moral problems, and for GMs who like to run an entire cast of deep and living characters.

### ULTRAVIOLET GRASSLANDS

Simply one of the most beautifully illustrated books in the Exalted Funeral catalogue. In mobius-esque with 70's fantasy flair, *UVG* offers you a wild ride through the titular grasslands and beyond. Set out as a kind of Oregon Trail of an adventure path, players take the role of weird-sci-magic heroes looking to make a name for themselves – kind of by going on an adventure holiday. The further away they go from home, the more renowned they'll be. With a clever XP and time system, as well as a lot of space for running off the road into weird place, *UVG* is almost indescribably open in the ways you want it to be, a defined in the ways that would be annoying if they weren't. While the central system of the game (a D20 system called SEACAT) is hidden away in the book, as if it doesn't want you to discover it, it's a good and flexible way to get through the adventure – but do with it as you will.



### OLD SCHOOL ESSENTIALS (AND ADVENTURES)

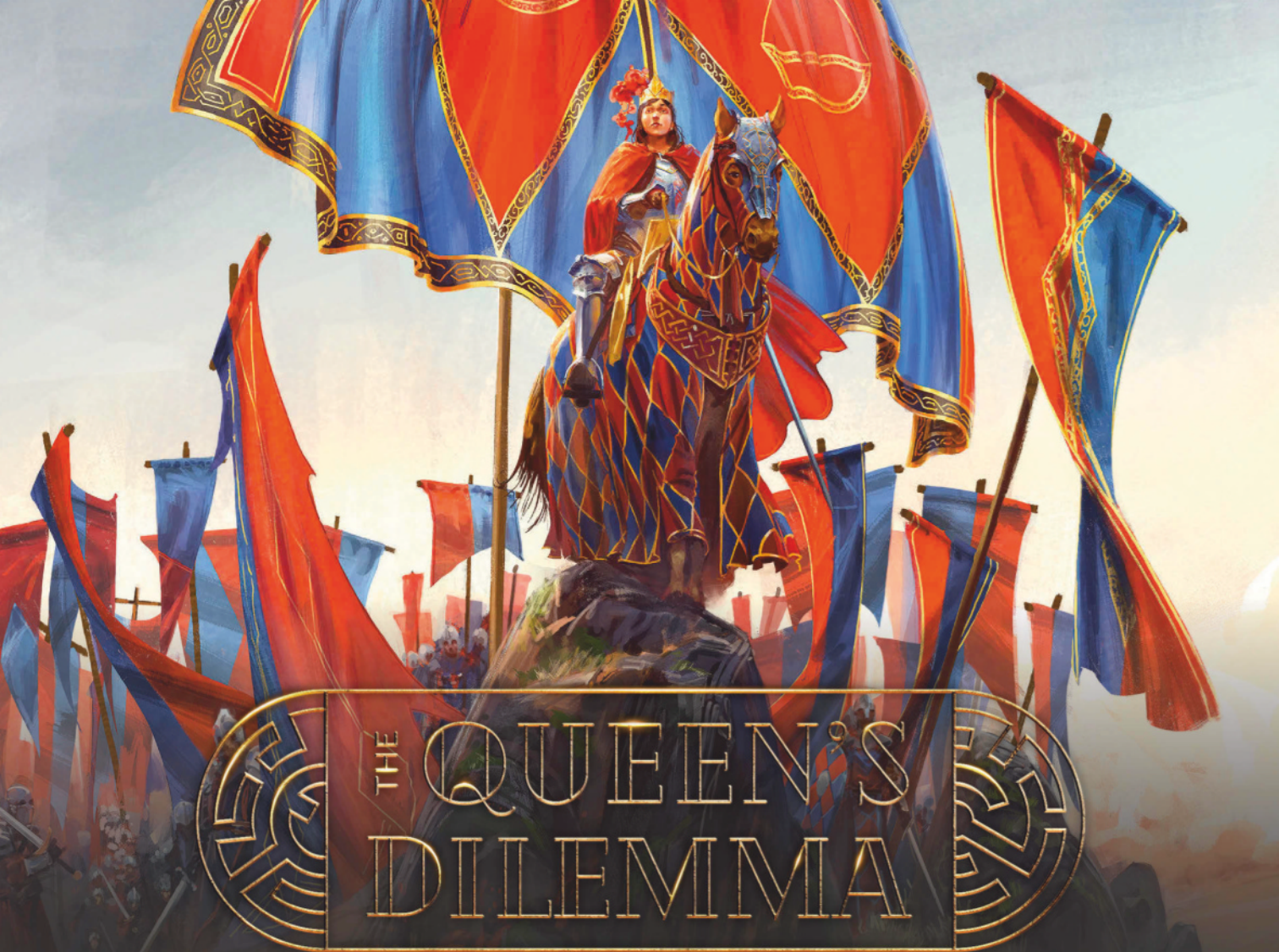
More or less a recreation of the classic B/X (Basic/Expert) system, and seeing a reimplement of THACO (to hit armour class 0) there's a lot of potential stumbling blocks here for modern players. On the other hand, if you want a crunchy dungeon-based adventure, there's few better ways to get that old school feel. Importantly, amongst the joyful amount of character creation, monster powers and so on, there's a central somewhat unstated rule of 'it's not always fair, but it is a lot of fun'. We are also particularly enamoured with the adventures, which could be dropped into any number of systems – particularly the charming *Incandescent Grottoes* for low level characters.

### FORBIDDEN PSLAM

*MÖRK BORG*, but make it minis. One of our favourite roleplaying games gets a miniatures game treatment – streamlined down and designed as short skirmish sessions. Each scenario comes with basic set up rules, as well as co-op, competitive, and solo versions. A single scenario lasts (for the most part) only six turns, which makes the game (especially in competitive play) feel more like a sports game than a classic skirmish wargame. Most missions are objective based, and the monsters all come with powers that make each scenario a little different from the last. With the campaign system (want to pick up injuries between games? Great news!) and the bundles of extra scenario books published for the game, there's more than enough ends of the world to explore.







SOON ON  
**KICKSTARTER**

AVAILABLE LANGUAGES



A SEQUEL TO THE AWARD-WINNING  
NARRATIVE LEGACY GAME

THE **KING'S DILEMMA**



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# WHAT'S IN A GAME? PLAYING GAMES DOESN'T MAKE YOU SMARTER

We all know games are good for us, but in what way? Each month in this series, Tim Clare untangles the science and philosophy behind what makes games good

Words by **Tim Clare**

**P**erhaps the most disappointing moment in my board game journey – aside from discovering that, no, the tiles from *Azul* aren't edible – came when I learned that playing chess doesn't make you smarter.

Not that I've spent much time playing chess – I'm more of a *Caverna* man myself – but I always thought there was a certain romance in this idea of chess as the ultimate test of intellect. It was as if those sixty-four dark and light squares were a dancefloor on which two brains could meet and engage in a beautiful duel.

Not for nothing did Ingmar Bergman choose chess as the central motif for *The Seventh Seal*, where a knight sits down for a game with Death. The key myth surrounding chess is one of ludic purity – that, among all games, chess is unrivalled in its ability to channel the character, intelligence and will of either player.

The truth – at least according to many researchers of psychology and artificial intelligence – is rather more prosaic. Getting good at chess, spending hours at the board learning stratagems and counterplays, doesn't result in improvements in general intelligence. It was the Russian psychologists Djakow, Petrowski and Rudik who, in the 1920s, first subjected the era's top chess players to a battery of tests to see if they were smarter than their non-chess-playing peers. Djakow and his colleagues indeed discovered that their subjects performed better – when the task was related to chess. In tests related to general intelligence, they showed no particular superiority.

This finding has been repeated many times over the century that followed. The skills developed by expert chess players are what researchers of intelligence call 'domain specific.' That is, they don't really generalise to tasks other than winning at chess. Chess isn't, for all its supposed romance, a test of intelligence or artistry. It's about pattern recognition, both in the sense of memorising openings and entire games, and in recognising certain configurations of pieces and transposing those board states across different contexts.

The same appears to be true for many board games with 'perfect information' – that is, traditional games like chess, draughts, Go and bao, and also modern ones, as in certain matchups in *Santorini*. Right from your first move, nothing is hidden, and nothing is random. It's always been tempting, therefore, to think of these games as training pure intelligence. But really they just train you to be good at that particular game.

Given this, you can understand my disappointment.

It would be nice to think that, as sit around the table and grapple with the pure logic puzzles of perfect information abstracts and similar games, we're learning skills that might help us tackle the intricacies nuclear physics or outmanoeuvre a rival in a business negotiation. But all is not lost. By looking at how people become good at board games, we can learn much.

First of all, it's worth noting that, for all the stories of chess prodigies and supposed innate geniuses, there are no examples, from any point in history, of anyone becoming great at chess without playing chess. Those who rose to grandmaster level, even supposed savants, played a lot. As in, a *lot*. They also generally had mentor figures – often several – who instructed them in general principles, guided their development, and helped them connect with other accomplished players against whom they could hone their edge.

The Hungarian chess teacher and educational psychologist László Polgár is perhaps the most famous example of someone testing this premise. He and his wife Klara raised their three daughters Zsuzsa, Zsófia, and Judit with the express intent of proving that genius is learned, not inherited. The girls were homeschooled, their education specialising in chess. All three grew up to become grandmasters, Judit and Zsuzsa rated respectively as the first and second-best female chess players in the world.

Sure, some humans seem to learn much faster than others, but even then, a lot of this can be attributed to things like motivation. The Polgár sisters often reported that they played chess because they enjoyed it. I recently met Lukian Hushpit, a 12-year-old Ukrainian







war refugee living in a hostel in Donegal with his mum and two brothers, who happens to be a talented chess player. Since arriving in Ireland he has taken part in many face-to-face tournaments across the country, winning in his category in Sligo. He also plays regularly online.

A lot was made in the local press of his being a 'prodigy', a 'genius', as if his skill at the game were a mysterious inheritance. But when I spoke to him and his mother, Oxana, she told me that when his father first introduced Lukian to the game at the age of five, Lukian immediately begged to play again – in fact, he continued to play, and beg to play again, until around half one in the morning, at which point his exhausted parents finally said enough.



Lukian showed me a play-by-play breakdown of his match against an adult Belarusian grandmaster, a match which he won. (I was relieved to see that neither player played a perfect game – that inaccuracies and blunders still happen to the most skilled of players) He and his mother told me of games he played at six or seven years old against adults, games where adults would sometimes cheat rather than admit they'd been thrashed by a child. In Ukraine, he would play in his after-school club for hours every day, as well as travelling to competitions all round the country.

In short, he got really good at chess because he practised. And he practised because he enjoyed it. This is much what the Polgár sisters reported over the years – the chess pieces were like toys to them, and their father emphasised that it was a game and found different ways to motivate them. Ordinary people can achieve extraordinary feats if they care about something, get a good teacher and put in the hours.

When we throw ourselves into a brain-burner of a board game, we might not be making ourselves better thinkers in general. As the author Steve Aylett put it: 'A sniper is like a genius – it's not enough to be one, you have to be one *at* something.' But what we *are* doing is proving that it can be done.

If you've ever played a game a few times and got better at it, maybe developed an intuitive sense for what cards someone might be holding in a trick-taking game, maybe squeezing a few more victory points out of your econ engine in a big worker-placement title, you've demonstrated to yourself the phenomenal capacity our brains have for acquiring and consolidating new knowledge, and forming new pathways, even as we get older. Indeed, the value of stimulating our brains with new challenges, forcing the generation and thickening of neurons, only rises as we get older. Neurogenesis staves off much of the decline in capacity associated with age. What fires together, wires together.

What chess shows us is that, if we want to master a new skill, like a language, a sport, juggling, cooking the perfect bundt cake, the path to success isn't complicated at all: find a willing teacher, then make it fun and interesting so you'll put in the hours necessary. Genius, in the end, is better understood as 'the art of being bothered.' 🧠

“When we throw ourselves into a brain-burner of a board game, we might not be making ourselves better thinkers in general”





# Ludological Lamentations

## MULTI-GAME MASTERMIND

Each month our in-house agony aunt answers your ludological lamentations

Words by **Ben Maddox**

**Q.**

I am a pragmatic sort but sometimes my thoughts are whisked away on a literary bent. Today I am reminded of the harrowing yet profoundly engaging memoir, *The Grass Arena*. If you don't know it, it is the story of a homeless man, consumed by drink who manages, through a savant-like ability at chess, to drag himself from the streets and into the constraints of bourgeois life. There is one scene that has bubbled up through the crusty byways of my cerebrum recently and that is a scene where the protagonist plays many games of chess simultaneously. I see him grimly stalking from table to table, thunking down knights and bishops. The assembled spectators agog at such a show of mastery. Our focus is pulled from the player to the crowd and back to the player again – but one group is never dwelled upon. That is the poor sods who have to wait for him to play seven other bloody games before they can take their turn.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you Robbie (the name has remained unchanged to shame the guilty), the author of my weekly grief. By day an unassuming IT professional but by night a swaggering hump of ludological arrogance. He strides into game night every week, IP t-shirt stretched over his belly, a baby yoda backpack thrown nonchalantly over one shoulder. He stands in the doorway surveying the room, *he's looking for a table to join* you think but you are only half right. This is a brain that cannot be fully satisfied by the stimuli of only *one* game. He needs to be mediocre at loads.

"It's just that you don't really provide me with much of a challenge."

He once told me after I'd been waiting for fifteen sodding minutes for him to come back from his tour of the tables and after we'd totted up the scores and he'd come a distant third he assured me he'd, "show me next time."

He didn't.

Other than the Dunning Kruger levels of esteem he holds for his own gaming prowess he's a really nice bloke though. Just last week he spent a good two hours at my place fiddling with some doodad in my computer and resolutely refused to take the twenty quid I thrust at him.

I would just let it go but it is ruining my game night. Oh Ben, as you are the Susan Sontag of the analogue gaming problem world, can you assist me, with the help of your enormous brain, to solve this knotty problem.

**I tremble in anticipation,**  
Waiting.



**A. Dear Waiting,**

Ah, I remember those glorious days when my mind was supple enough to allow me to deal with more than one thing at a time. I, myself, used to play multiple games at once until, one day, a stray brainwave went the wrong way across a synapse and my impulse to place a worker and my need to relieve myself became irrevocably confused (it really was tragic, I'll never get that meeple out of the U-bend).

Now my days are harmless and prosaic. I spend them skinning woodland animals and hoping that the cabal is brought to its knees. And all of this, alas, alone. Janine really doesn't know what she's missing (all of my attempts to contact her psychically have, thus far, failed. Though she always did have issues unclogging her crown chakra).

If you want to keep his attention though, you need a game that demands it. There is no greater candidate for this than the stone cold classic, *Hansa Teutonica*. This is a game that consumes you even when it isn't your turn. This is a game that, through its sharp fanged interaction, is almost as much fun on other people's turns as your own. If this doesn't keep young Robbie at the table then, I'm afraid, nothing will.

I have a question for you though. Why would you want to clip the wings of such a beautiful bird? So few of us are destined to fly. So few can ascend the heights and touch the face of god (I'll get there one day, Janine!).

In twenty years time will prosperity thank you that you confined this beautiful mind to *one table*? Will poor Robbie thank you when he sees someone holding aloft their prize of a free copy of *Bohnanza* for winning the annual week long *Twilight Imperium* tournament? Will you feel the sting of watching every turn for him be a painful reminder of what he could have been? No, you'll be too busy going to romantic nights out at Wagamama with that loser from Basingstoke won't you Janine! I can transcend the plain of mere mortals! I can become one with the universe while you sit in your semi-detached cooing over Love Island with *him*.

**With all of my ludological love,**  
**Ben**

### Seeking guidance?

Have you got a gaming problem? Want Ben to dish out some ludological wisdom in your direction? Get in touch. Contact with Ben on Twitter [@5games4doomsday](#) or email the editor at [christopher.eggett@warnersgroup.co.uk](mailto:christopher.eggett@warnersgroup.co.uk) and we'll publish, and answer, the most amusing problems.





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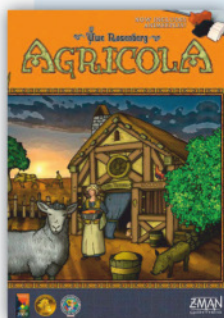


## 2007

We finally reach a turning point in board game history from here on in, it's nothing but classics

Words by **Matthew Vernal**

**F**ifteen years. Fifteen years of big names, companies rising and falling, as well as so many failed collectable card games. But we've made it. From this point onwards, we're blessed with board games that are landmarks in our hobby, influential and heavily expanded titles. We've finally reached the Golden Age of Board Games. Thank you ever so much for everyone who's joined us so far and hope you're looking forward to seeing just what gaming had to offer in 2007!



## AGRICOLA

Our first game of 2007 is one of the hobby's heavyweights, in that the box literally weighs nearly two kilograms. Uwe Rosenberg's bulging baby is crammed full of wooden discs, sticks and in later editions, custom animal meeples, as well as being one of the best

worker placement games (and certainly one of the genre's biggest influencers) with the least interesting hook.

Players are (and brace yourself because it's just so exciting) 17th Century subsistence farmers. Life is hard and not starving is your biggest goal. Players must passively fight for resources as everyone attempts to build a future for their farming family, attempting to find the best combination of unique occupation and improvement cards to go from a modest two-room wooden hut to a vast stone manor.

It's a game that captures the feeling of accomplishment through struggle, as every action taken away is another crisis you have to overcome, creating an experience that's both a solitary puzzle with the most positively passive aggressive competition.

With thousands of copies sold worldwide, a one-and-a-half year long streak as the top rated game on BGG and a wide variety of spin offs as well as spiritual sequels like *Caverna*, it may be a little dated now but there's still plenty of charm and brain scratching challenge from a game inundated with wood and cardboard in the best possible way.

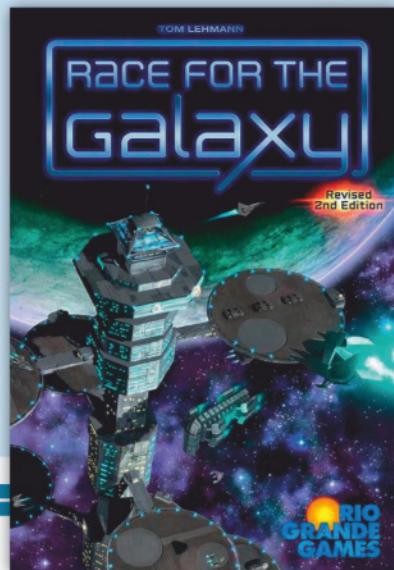


## RACE FOR THE GALAXY

From a game with literally hundreds of components to one that succeeds solely with a deck of cards, *Race for the Galaxy* is a spacefaring, tableau building card game with a difference.

Each player has a hand of seven different action cards, choosing one of them face down. All cards are revealed and *only* the actions shown are then performed, but everyone gets a chance to do them, with a bonus given to any player who specifically chose that action. The game's economy is fuelled entirely by a deck of over 100 unique cards, with players having to discard to pay the cost for new cards, goods are face-down cards taken from the deck to represent various exotic space treats which, naturally, are sold to draw more cards (or score points.)

Whilst the hieroglyphic shorthand used to show each card's powers can be a bit perplexing at first, the game has been celebrated for its minimalist components and maximalist approach to card combo potential. Multiple expansions adding all sorts of weird and wild cards have been released, as well as a popular dice-focused spin off *Roll for the Galaxy*, even speedier card game *Jump Drive* and considerably weightier *New Frontiers*.







## BRASS: LANCASHIRE

If you've ever wanted to see the best board game glow up between editions, look at the original *Brass* and the more



recently released *Brass: Lancashire*. Yes, board games really did look that beige just a couple of decades ago.

Fortunately, the core mechanics have always been an interesting industrial intoxication. Created by prolific designer of beloved weighty board games Martin Wallace, players are on the precipice of the British Industrial Revolution, as mines, canals and factories slowly expand across the countryside. Players invest in infrastructure to modernise the board, working hard to increase their income and VP, whilst being careful to not make it too easy for their opponents to capitalise on your hard work.

Few other games capture the real exploitative and reactionary aspects of early capitalism, making it less of a game with lots of table talk and laughs, but a perplexing puzzle, as everyone ponders their best course of action, squeezing out every advantage they can and giving nothing away if possible.

The game saw modest sales and many fans, soaring high up the top 100, but its reinvention with *Brass: Birmingham* and a gorgeous new edition (which also added the "Lancashire" subtitle to distinguish the two games) rejuvenated its popularity, ascending it to a Top 20 position. Just goes to show that the right look can make a 2+ hour game obsessed with coal shine like a diamond.

## THE RED DRAGON INN

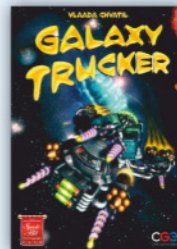
On the far end of the spectrum from a heavy historical economy game, comes a rip-rollocking literal tavern brawl of slamming cards down and drinks back.

Everyone is a hero coming back from a successful heroic quest, now deciding that they want to increase their split of the treasure by getting their compatriots black out drunk. The definition of a "Take That" card game, each turn players draw cards from their unique character deck, choose one to play (often causing others to lose health and/or gold) before finally dealing a drink card face down to an opponent and flipping over their own



beverage to neck down. If a player's health ever matches the amount of alcohol they've consumed, they're eliminated, leaving one less violent adventurer to deal with.

Silly and rambunctious, the game is best known for catapulting Slugfest Games into an established publisher. The game has eight boxed expansions, countless promotional cards and an array of spin off titles, with next year finally seeing the heroes work together for once in *Tales from the Red Dragon Inn*, as they head off on the adventure that will no doubt lead to more drunken chicanery in the future.



## GALAXY TRUCKER

Back to space again, but keeping with silly games that see you laughing at others' misfortunes, *Galaxy Trucker*' is the zany ship-building scramble

brought to us by Vlaada Chvatil. In a vision of a future where plumbing is easier to ship across the known universe if the actual ships are built from it, players must cobble together tiles to construct their interstellar hauler, factoring in engines, crew, defences, cargo hold all whilst other players are also grabbing these tiles in real-time.

Once players have assembled their soon-to-be space wrecks, they get to experience some of the best Schadenfreude in tabletop gaming, as each stage of the journey is revealed, sometimes leading to riches, but often discovering smugglers, meteorites and combat zones. Each time a ship could get hit, two dice are rolled to determine exactly which row or column is effected, leading to moments where one player is able to expertly destroy a massive meteorite with a laser blast, whilst another not only loses a vital component, but all connecting parts too, as everyone else laughs in relief that it wasn't their ship unceremoniously snapped in half.

A charming game that delivers on excess without being overly complex, it's seen several expansions adding new components, new challenges and even weirder ship designs, as well as an entire reboot edition released last year, ensuring more people learn that even in space, sometimes life just gives you a meteorite exactly where you don't want it.





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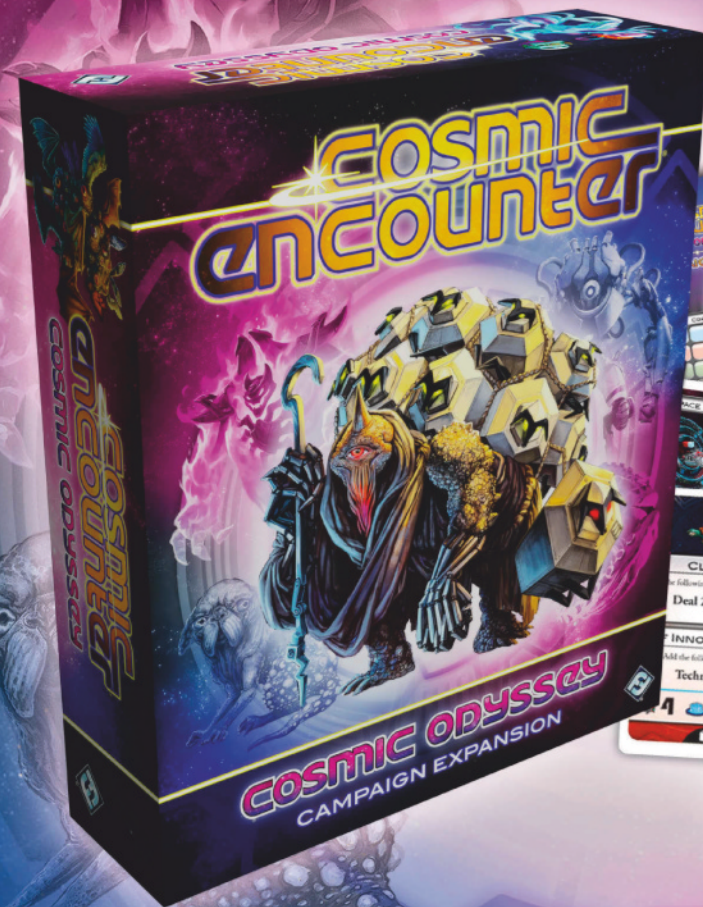


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# TOO MANY SCOUNDRELS

Unexpected Games drops another surprise Words by **Christopher John Eggett**

**H**ow many scoundrels are too many? Ten? One hundred? Corey Konieczka bets that 3001 is probably when it gets just too much, and has settled for only including a total of 3000 combinations of scoundrels for you to recruit in his new high-tech wild west 'Euro-ish' game.

The story is straightforward, as you'd expect. "A time traveller has come back in time to the wild west, and they've brought this future technology with them," says Konieczka matter-of-factly, "which they're using to become rich and famous. And in doing this they've rubbed some people the wrong way. And for various reasons they've annoyed all of these people, and they mysteriously vanish."

"It's pretty clear they're dead," says the designer with a grin, "and now we play the leader of these rival gangs with our own motivations. So, each character – even though they play the same has their own motivations."

These motivations amount to 'get hold of the tech' – whether that's to destroy it and return to a simpler way of life, or to enrich your own gang with it. Either way, this is the first 'sort-of-Euro' from Konieczka's studio, Unexpected Games – and we'll get to why that's a 'sort-of' later.

### WHAT'S IN A NUMBER?

So, let's get to the first question. Why are there so many scoundrels in this game, and what exactly are they?

"There are exactly 3000 of them," says Konieczka, "which I think is the main hook – the idea that spawned the game."

"The way it works is that there are job cards and trait cards, and these get combined together to create unique scoundrels," the designer continues.

Konieczka then starts pulling a unique scoundrel together using random cards. We quickly create a 'Brilliant Researcher' – one of the more vanilla options. Soon though, we're flinging cards together to create interesting combinations. A personal favourite from this short creative burst (which will surely be what everyone does the first time they open the box) is the 'seductive printer' – a lady with a kind of robo-arm money printer.

The combination of cards is one we've seen before a few times – *Mystic Vale* is probably the most famous example. The bottom card is someone in long-johns, pyjamas or petticoats, and their 'base stats', and then a see-through plastic card that sits on top – changing the appearance of the card below, and putting some clothes on them too. These slot into a card sleeve, and the total gives you one of the 3000 scoundrels that form the army of potential hirelings for the game.

"All 3000 are unique, they're all going to play a little bit different. Throughout the course of the game you're hiring these characters, and so a lot of the game is kind of figuring out like, which of these characters are kind of worth the money for you hiring, which ones are going

work into the strategy that you're trying to do this particular game, or maybe what you need at the moment," says the designer. While some characters will generate you money, others will provide powers, or the classic end game victory point cards.

"Since it's randomised, it's a lot harder to work out what every character is," says Konieczka, "you have to think on your feet a little bit more."

This is an area of continued exploration for the designer. Last year's *Voices In My Head* was about making somewhat fuzzy decisions based on the social vibe and hidden information, and *The Initiative* the studio's first game, had a fair bit of limited communication co-op about it. Here it seems like the designer is pushing against the 'solving' of games. In *3000 Scoundrels* the added element of bluffing makes a big difference to what could have been a straightforward build-the-tableau-get-the-points kind of game.

### THE FASTEST DRAW IN THE WEST

Each player is given a player sheet, and a deck of seven mini poker cards, four of which are going to be drawn into the hand and played by each player. Initially, each player has powers relating to most of the poker cards in their deck. These are your actions, which are triggered by placing down a card facedown into that slot.







When you play a card face down, you tell everyone around the table what it is. Or rather, you tell them whatever you want – because bluffing is key. Some cards will simply have no actions associated with them on your board, so to do anything with those you'll need to lie in the first instance. If you don't get called out on your lie (or your truth that sounded like a lie) you get to do everything that matches the number you just dropped. If you've got a four printed on the board that gives you \$4 – if you have a scoundrel already purchased from the saloon in your tableau that has a four on it, you'll get those benefits too.

Winning is a case of collecting technology – 'safe' tokens depicting small vaults on one side and points on the other. These pieces of tech have been strewn across three areas of the town, each with their own range of possible points – the laboratory for example can give you between two and seven points for collecting a token, while the estate has a three to five range, making it more consistent.

Players can scout and mark sites using the same action system as gaining money. Marking means to place a token on it to declare how many points are under the safe on the site. Of course, you can lie about this too. You get more

points if you happen to pick up a safe with the matching number marked on it, but this is, of course, pretty rare when there's the opportunity to cause problems for other players.

The game offers a kind of brevity that we don't always see in the 'tight Euro' space – there's a choice for shorter games of 'two days' where only three safes are collected which can run to as short as 30 minutes for a two player game. The longer game takes place over three days.

Konieczka explains how the bluffing, or rather, the catching out of liars, works.

"After you play a card facedown anybody else can say, 'I don't believe you,' and they



# 3000 SCOUNDRELS



when I was developing this game to really, make sure that the bluffing worked regardless of who was playing. And what I mean by that is you've got the two extremes. You've got the people who are like, 'oh, I don't want to lie. My friends are going to know that I'm lying. I'm going to try to tell the truth all the time.' And so the game needs to be fun if that person's playing the game, but it also needs to be fun for the person who says 'I'm just going to ignore the numbers on my cards and do whatever the heck I want.'"

"And so, both players

can send one of their henchmen out to investigate you – to ensure that you're telling the truth," says the designer, "this doesn't prevent you from using any abilities. It doesn't reveal it and in fact, they can do this at any point during your turn."

This means that players can ret-con the previous choices of a player – dodging the usual tactic in this kind of game which is 'lie the first time when there's little information, tell the truth but make it sound like a lie the second time.'

After all the cards are played and the day has ended, cards with henchmen on get flipped. If the henchmen was wrong – i.e. the player is telling the truth – they go to jail. If the henchman is right, the player guessing the bluff correctly will gain a reputation, and the bluffing player will lose a reputation. These are end game victory points.

"So every time you bluff, there's a chance that you could be losing reputation," adds the designer, "which is very important." Reputation is subtracted from your final score at the end of the game, so there's a real benefit to, at very least, not getting caught.

Because you've only got seven cards in your deck, you're always going to be drawing one of

the cards you just had – this makes the bluffing a kind of 'weighing up the odds' game for the accuser. All of these mechanics gel together in an interesting format which prizes player interaction over dry optimisation. You can try and win the game this way, but it's simply not in the spirit of the game.

## HOW THE WEST WAS WON

"There's a lot of different approaches you can take. You could focus on finding the best safes, and stealing those, ignoring everything else. Some people invest all their money in hiring scoundrels that are worth tech points, while other people just focus on the reputation game," says Konieczka about the various strategies that players have adopted so far.

The game started as a "generic kingdom builder" and one of the original versions used dice to generate the actions, rather than playing cards, "one of the inspirations was *Machi Koro* – and in one of the first iterations of the game you would roll dice into a cup and then you would lie about what you rolled," laughs the designer, "it's changed and evolved."

"I've worked on some games in the past that had like some bluffing in them, but less overt bluffing," says Konieczka, "it was very difficult

should be able to play the game and have fun and that was kind of this fine balancing act. That's where the influence track came from where you can get punished for lying and you can get rewarded for catching people for lying, but you've only got a limited number of times that you can actually call people. So you've got to be careful. That's also where the zero card came from. It's like, well, let's take a card in your hand that even if you're the most honest person in the world, there's nowhere for you to place it. You have to lie. Just that tension of that card existing means that every other day everybody has played their zero somewhere. And where did they play it? Trying to deduce that is a lot of fun."





We spend a few moments play with more combinations of cards – Konieczka showing off how the dog art covers up the entire person on the card behind, leaving behind only the name combination of “Stunning Dog”. Other combos, at the most expensive end, even grab safes from outside of the game or do other wacky things.

We try to categorize the game amongst the others, and stumble across the word Eurogame. Which isn’t met with total agreement, as we might have expected.

“I’ve had people call it my most ‘Euro’ design, I kind of resent that,” he laughs, “I mean, it’s not wrong. You are getting points even though there are thematic things... I feel like this game is the game for people who want a light engine building

“I think a lot of people when they design stuff they would say ‘that’s just too crazy’. And I kept the crazy in.”

game with a lot of replayability, lots of player interaction.”

Here we return to *Machi Koro* again, “so let’s take the parts I like about that, and add more texture, more strategy, more player interaction. There’s also a hidden group of people that this will appeal to too – and that’s people who like collectable card games. And the reason I say that is that CCG players, one of the things they like is building their deck and they’re always on the lookout for the most broken combo, they’re asking ‘how can I exploit the system the most?’”

“With all the crazy combinations, and the combinations of characters that show up, it’s a game of really thinking on your feet – like build that broken combination of characters each game.”

The designer goes on to mention that, having played the game with Richard Garfield (the designer of *Magic: The Gathering* and many other popular card games), who liked that Konieczka didn’t pull his punches.

“I think a lot of people when they design stuff they would say ‘that’s just too crazy,’” says Konieczka, “and I kept the crazy in.”

### WHAT’S NEXT?


While we can’t set a release date for 3000 *Scoundrels* just yet (as we’re all aware, shipping makes printing a date a fools errand) we can talk about the future.

“I’m starting work on a big ambitious project that will probably take me two years to make,” says the designer, “so if this game turns out to be worth two years worth of effort, that will be my next thing. If not, I’ve got a shelf full of prototypes,” says the designer, teasing what we hope is the first ‘heavy’ game from the studio.

“All I’ll say is look at my first three games, they’re all vastly different from each other,” says Konieczka, “If this next game pans out the way I hope it does – it’s wild and ambitious on so many levels, that at least one of these things will resonate with people, even if the other five innovative things don’t.” 🍀







IN ISSUE 70

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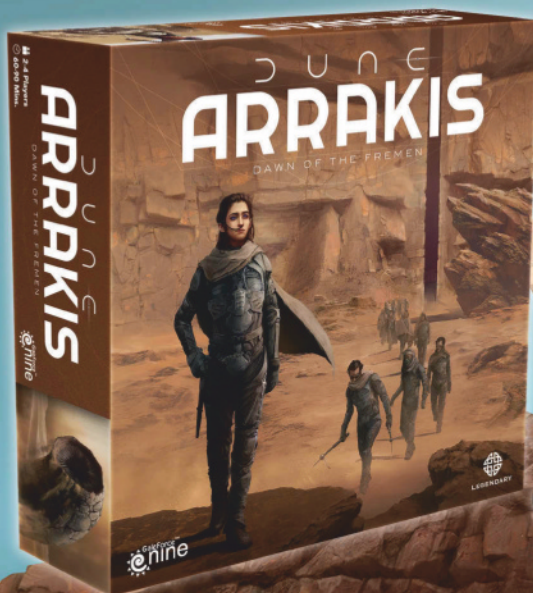
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# PLAYED



74



63



67



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**SHOULD YOU PLAY IT?** MUST-PLAY | YES | MAYBE | NO



# BATMAN: THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS BOARD GAME

Rotten Gotham rides again

**Designer:** Daryl Andrews & Morgan Dontanville | **Publisher:** Cryptozoic Entertainment



**F**rank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* is considered one of the pivotal points in graphic novels, a sign that comics could be something for adults to enjoy and treat as 'art'. His work has also been called bigoted, and can fairly be described as 'unhinged' on occasion (*The Dark Knight Strikes again*, the sequel to the comic on which this game is based, is an example of this). The comic is about Batman returning to fight crime once again, having retired after the death of Robin. But he's got old, and he's not faster than the bad guys any longer – meaning Batman simply has to become more brutal. Whereas a younger Batman would leave the garden variety thugs neatly piled up with only a sore head, here he is ending or irreversibly changing lives. It's a story of a man past his prime giving up the last of what he has left in him – maybe to make things better for the city, but also out of ego. It's about him knowing he will lose in the end. Attempts to put it on screen are often slight failures or miss something of the spirit of the story, and that's partly because they sanitise the somewhat nasty heart that thumps life into it.

But that is not the case here, in this (mostly) solitary retelling of the story the rulebook begins with a warning

and a description of 'how to lose'.

The game comes with a huge board displaying Gotham, broken up into regions and subsections between them, within these are individual locations cut into three pizza slices. The slices all have a sort-of-worker-placement action on them that you'll take as part of your turn. But before that, the city is overrun with mutants, bad cops and press that you'll need to take down (well, not the press, just sneak past them) and find the boss of each chapter.

Combat is a classic 'rounds of dice rolling' thing, although, you always have a chance to retreat from normal thugs. Batman rolls D4s – six sided dice with two sides taken up by 'batarang' wings – the enemy rolls their own coloured dice and you compare blocks and 'Pow!' dice to tot up damage, or remove dice from the enemy dice pool. You work out how many mutants or police you're fighting by looking at those in the space you're in and those adjacently connected in a kind '*Pandemic*' if you were punching the virus' kind of way.

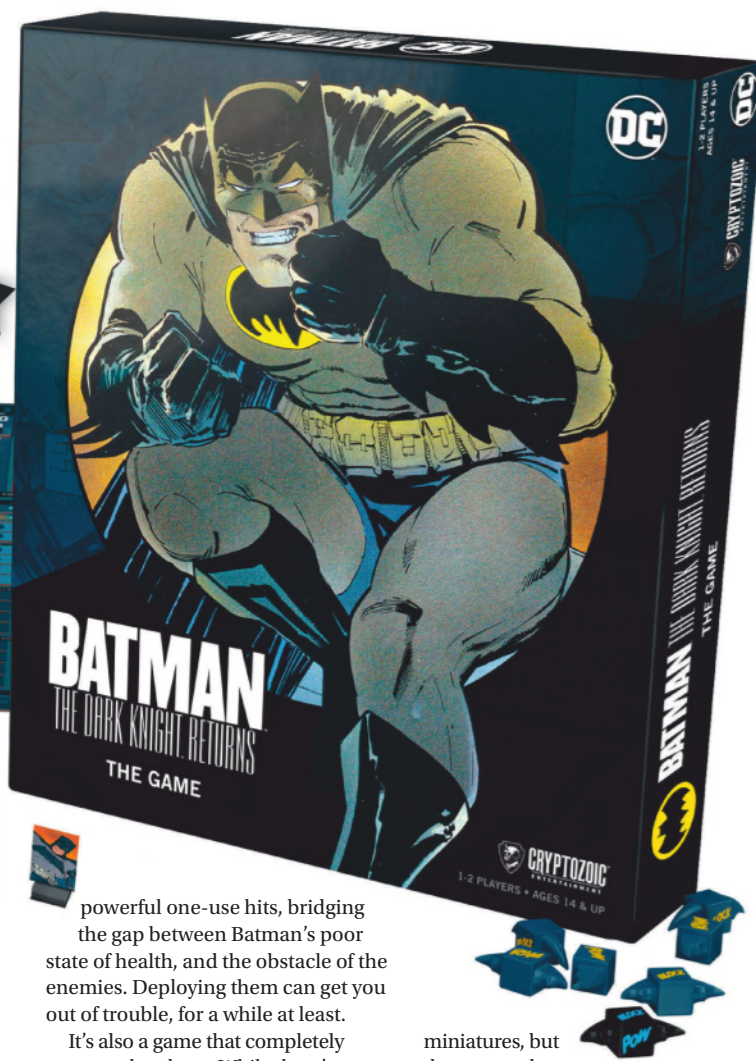


Standard stuff you might think – except for the fact we're drawing on the board as we go. At the end of each round a new path can be added to the board, which is entirely wipe clean. You'll be upgrading space by simply adding a "x2" next to it, deciding how many enemies to generate each turn by scribbling that in the GCPD spawn box, changing the boss health when you bash them in. It's simple, but it feels revolutionary. New paths make movement for Batman and his allies easier but also creates a bigger network of enemies.

Throughout the game your choices are simple, but they can be agonising. There's only so much you can do – but you've got to get it right. Your dice that hit go into cooldown, meaning you're rolling others that might hurt you instead. Is it time to get out of there, or to stay and fight, clearing out as much as you can?

The game comes with four books – each with their own Batman powers, set up rules, and boss. The first boss, Two Face, needs to be tracked down by finding clues across the city, whereas





## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

(Deluxe edition components)

- ▶ Game board
- ▶ Batman miniature
- ▶ Dry-erase marker
- ▶ 19 Boss, ally and vehicle miniatures
- ▶ 31 Dice (including ally, upgraded and boss dice)
- ▶ 27 Standard action cards
- ▶ Cooldown cards
- ▶ 126 Tokens
- ▶ 33 Enemy command cards
- ▶ 11 Riot tokens
- ▶ Vs mode sequence card

the second – the mutant leader needs their strongholds broken down to gain access to a final showdown in the dump. Each book brings more danger and your batman never really recovers from the worst of the battles.

Which is the other wrinkle, and one you might not really appreciate until you get ready for book two, which is – the board stays the same between sessions. If you make a mess of the city, allow riots to break out or just get really beaten up, you're going to be bringing all that with you to the next chapter. After our successful run in with Two Face our Batman was down on all three tracks (grit, health and sanity) to a point of precarity. At the start of the next book you'll gain five points back in areas of your choice, but we did have to limp back to Wayne Manor for a minor recharge (and to pick up a bat-copter).

Power-ups like the bat-copter or bat-tank can be gained by meeting certain conditions, or just by returning home to the manor. They operate as

powerful one-use hits, bridging the gap between Batman's poor state of health, and the obstacle of the enemies. Deploying them can get you out of trouble, for a while at least.

It's also a game that completely respects the player. While there's some randomisation at the start, everything else is more or less a choice. And when it's not a choice it's a specific instruction. For example, when adding whichever flavour of opposition token to the map at the end of the turn the player picks where they go. It's a kind of management puzzle that begins by being helpful, but eventually traps you. It's another clever little nudge that makes the game impossibly smooth.

It's so smooth in fact that I would compare the experience closer to playing a video game than a traditional solo boardgame experience. I was entirely invested, I wanted to get back to it when I was away from it, it had such expert flow in my options and choices that I barely glanced at the rulebook after each scenario's set up.

The art style is the muted, 80s colour palette of the comic – some might be put off by this, but it will be instantly recognised by those who like the source text. The deluxe edition (£110 RRP) comes with some lovely

miniatures, but the art standees are great and the standard edition (£65 RRP) is probably the one to go for if you're not a painter. And yes, there is a VS mode, where one player controls the villains and the spread of mutants, press and police – and plays a hand of cards for various actions of the boss. Traps are the most interesting here, making Batman's goals a little less obvious.

*Batman: The Dark Knight Returns Board Game* is a stunning piece of work, a true gift to solitaire gamers, and an impressive retelling of the source text. Frank Miller remains a divisive figure, but this game is not. This is *the* solo Batman game as far as we're concerned. Whether it marks a new point in comic book games on the tabletop is yet to be seen. 📌

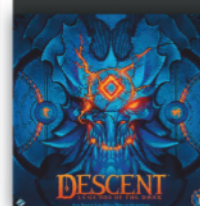
**CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT**

## PLAY IT? MUST-PLAY

An exquisitely formed retelling of the classic comic book, with all of its slightly rotten heart intact. An outstanding example of a pure solo game.

## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED DESCENT: LEGENDS OF THE DARK...

Sort of, anyway. If that sense of the game getting totally out of your way is something you're interested in, then it's time to grab your bat-dice.







# 303 SQUADRON

Does everyone need a 303?

**Designer:** Michal Kohmann | **Publisher:** Hobby



Since the huge success of *Twilight Struggle* in the early 2000s, card-driven wargame-Euro hybrids have enjoyed a steady rise in popularity. Buckets of dice, complex charts and cardboard chits have been replaced with plastic minis, card decks and lavish production standards. Opening up the world of historical combat to a whole new audience of gamers.

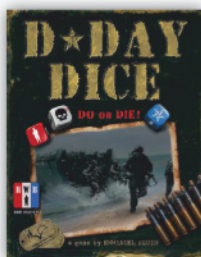
*303 Squadron* continues this tradition. It's a scenario-based co-op for one-to-four players, set around an iconic group of largely Polish pilots who were instrumental in helping the Allies win the Battle of Britain. And it looks brilliant. The pilot and event cards, as well as scenarios, give accurate historical flavour to each play. While the included compendium gives details of all the RAF pilots, alongside information on all the planes and events on show.

Each player takes the role of a 303 Squadron pilot, flying a Hawker Hurricane. You'll usually be up against 10 or more German aircraft and will have around eight turns of combat to meet your objective. Goals vary from stopping bombing raids



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Two main boards
- ▶ 4 Player boards
- ▶ 32 Plastic planes and bases
- ▶ 109 Cards
- ▶ 21 Dice
- ▶ 20 Wooden cubes
- ▶ 100 Cardboard tokens



on cities or fleets, to simply getting home in one piece. But all will include intense dogfights. So far, so war game.

The card combat system is where the game really shines. Players roll custom dice which usually include hit, evasion, manoeuvre and blank sides. A player always rolls two dice, while the enemy's dice pool depends on both number and types of German aircraft in your space. Once you know your results, you can manipulate the outcome by playing cards. These give you an extra result (hit, evade etc) but also an ability. For example, you may get an extra hit for each manoeuvre result you rolled.

If you're still struggling to meet your objective, other pilots in your space can chip in a card of their own. This is again symbol-based, but you're completing a set of three symbols (on a separate section of the cards) to get an additional result – perhaps the last point of damage you need to take a bomber down.

Each Allied pilot has limited ammo, which ticks down after each round.

Worse still, the ammo limit affects your hand size for the all-important action cards. While any damage you can't avoid will take out crucial systems – further reducing hand-size, limiting movement or forcing you to discard cards. This does a great job of injecting tension into the dogfights, making you think about every decision.

But the reliance on this clever card-dice mechanism for the gameplay also causes its problems. Firstly, it lacks the realism most people look for in a war game. Having a dogfight game where both speed and altitude are ignored is not only unrealistic, but begs the question – why is this an aircraft game? It may as well be tanks, or orcs, or whatever. Especially as, if you run out of ammo or crash, you can land and reload – or just come back as someone else altogether.

All this also presumes you can work out what to do in the first place. I've read a lot of terrible rulebooks – including many for prototypes. And I'm sorry to say *303 Squadron's* is one of the worst I've experienced. It looks very pretty. But the order in which it has been laid out makes little sense, while some of the mechanisms are impossible to understand. It took me finding several videos and reading a laundry list of rules Q&As to get going, which simply isn't good enough.

Once you do get up and running, and beat the simple training scenario, the base game has just five more scenarios. Each has its little historical wrinkles, but they're all eight-round co-op dogfights. Rather cynically, the back page of the compendium is an ad for two expansions I can't help feeling should've been thrown in here. Which makes this feel all the more like a real opportunity missed, as the clever combat mechanism seems worthy of a much more ambitious project. I could really see it working long-term, perhaps as a one-versus-one LCG system. But as a co-op mechanism bolted onto an ill-fitting theme, I fear it has very limited appeal. 🍷

**CHRIS MARLING**

**PLAY IT? MAYBE**

## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED D-DAY DICE

If you're looking for a step-up in complexity and scale from a light war game such as *D-Day Dice*.



# LONG SHOT: THE DICE GAME

On the right track

Designer: Chris Handy | Publisher: Perplext



If *Long Shot: The Dice Game* proves anything, it's that you shouldn't judge a board game by its theme. This latest title from designer Chris Handy (actually a streamlined roll-and-write-ish remix of his 2009 game *Long Shot*) takes place in the world of 1930s horse racing, with players betting on and/or buying horses while racing them around its dinky, cartoony track. It's not a world that'll be to every player's taste – especially those of us who question the sport's treatment of its equine participants, and the social cost of gambling on its outcomes. But even if you wouldn't go within a mile of Ascot and couldn't care less about the Grand National, you'd have to try hard not to enjoy this fast-paced, push-your-luck experience.

Each player gets their own brightly coloured player sheet, which they'll scrawl on with a dry-erase marker. They'll mark their bets on the eight competing horses, while also noting other bonuses, especially on the Bingo-like "concessions" grid, where a completed row or column of horse numbers earns a valuable boon. At the start, nobody owns any of the steeds, but each turn the active player will determine which advances around the track by rolling two dice: one (eight-sided) to select which horse moves, and one (six-sided) to determine how

far. One or more other horses may edge forward a space, too, if they've been marked for "secondary movement" on the active horse's card. Then all players take it in turns to perform an action connected to that horse.

You might want to place a bet (of up to \$3 per go) on it. Or you might want to purchase the horse, gaining its card and unique power, plus some bonus cash if it places first, second or third by the game's end. But you can also mark an "X" on its "Helmet" space to allow you to continue placing bets on the horse after it passes the "no-bet" line on the track; or mark its "Jersey" space to add an "X" of your own on any horse card (this will increase the chances of your chosen horse benefitting from secondary movement).

Then there are the aforementioned concessions. This is where the fun *really* happens. As well as getting to add more cash or place free bets, if things aren't going your chosen horses' way, you can always score a concession which allows you to boost its movement. Or, conversely, move another horse (or two) *back*. This means the game, despite its subtitle, isn't simply a matter of rolling dice and reacting to the results. You can really mess with the action, pulling seeming sure bets back from the finish line at the last minute, or nudging a dark horse towards victory.

It might sound like there's a lot going on, but the game flows smoothly and surely, and it's very easy to learn, too, making it ideal for any



newcomers to your gaming group. It also scales faultlessly to different player counts, working as well with just two of you (or a solo player) as it does with a table-crowding eight. This flexibility, combined with its potential for delivering sudden, thrilling reversals of fortune (or misfortune) on the track, make *Long Shot: The Dice Game* a real winner. 🍀

DAN JOLIN

## PLAY IT? MUST-PLAY

A fast, fun game of racing, betting and doing everything in your power to swing the action in your favour. So good, you'll enjoy it even if you don't like horse racing.



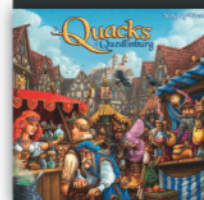
## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 1 Track board
- ▶ 8 Player sheets
- ▶ 8 Dry-erase markers
- ▶ 8 Starting cards
- ▶ 24 Horse cards (three sets)
- ▶ 1 Horse die
- ▶ 1 Movement die
- ▶ 1 Solo sheet
- ▶ 1 Rules booklet



## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED THE QUACKS OF QUEDLINBURG...

Thematically and mechanically *Long Shot* is completely different from *Quacks*, but in terms of accessibility and the enjoyability of its luck-pushing, it's sure to appeal to the same crowd.





# DUNGEON FIGHTER SECOND EDITION

**Designer:** Aureliano Buonfino, Lorenzo Silva, Lorenzo Tucci Sorrentino | **Publisher:** Horrible Guild



**M**ost dexterity games balance their gameplay so that players with perfect coordination and those who aim for the bullseye but hit the TV screen enjoy the game equally.

If you have even a glimmer of hope to successfully land a throw or a flick, that, with a healthy dose of comedy from various component-flying mishaps, is enough to keep trying.

*Dungeon Fighters* went radically the other way. It decided to kill the hope of any player, no matter how good, of ever winning a game. Yet it guarantees that while failing miserably, you will also have the time of your life.

In this dexterity dungeon crawler, players will be fighting monsters by throwing dice to bounce them off the table onto the board fashioned like a target. The aim, of course, is to hit the bullseye to deal maximum damage, but landing anywhere on this generously sized board will be a good start. If you think all you need to do is bounce the dice just right, think again. The monsters, the



dungeons rooms and your hero's weapons will instruct you on how to throw the dice. Flicking the dice off your nose with the left hand while blindfolded will be the easiest task the game sets.

As the dungeon's monsters continue to have an upper hand, there is no sense of despair. The ridiculousness of contortions you need to pull off each round coupled with spectacular misses brings too much hilarity. When you do eventually land a dice on target, it feels like a minor miracle and an immense sense of elation unites everyone. But if not, you try again, another dungeon, another monster, because you don't want the fun to stop. 🎲

**ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA**

**PLAY IT? YES**

# FRENCH TOAST

**Designer:** Peter C. Hayward | **Publisher:** Blue Beard Entertainment

**I**s a balloon more like a horse than it is like French toast? This is the sort of question you'll have to grapple with in *French Toast*, a party game for 2-10+ players. Following a common party game template; one player is given a word on a card and must help other people guess the word they've been given. The catch? They may only repeat the guesses of their teammates back to them.

With each guess made, the clue giver must consider if the guess is closer to the word than the previous guess. If it is, they repeat the new guess, if it isn't they repeat the previous guess back. All games begin with the guessers asking if the word is French toast. From there you have 30 seconds of guessing before the round ends. At the end of each round the clue giver provides a hint via a deck of hint cards and a six increment scale from 'is' to 'is not'. At the end of the sixth round if the word has not been guessed, then everyone loses.



The party game market is a crowded one and I'm not sure *French Toast* does much to stand out. The initial novelty of having to give clues in Kenku-like fashion definitely provides the tinder for some friendly arguments once the target word is revealed. Whether a horse is more like a dog or a pig for instance (Dog of course...). It also proved simple to teach, surviving an after work drinks stress test, going from learning to laughter in about five minutes.

However, after a couple of games it started to feel like twenty questions as we got better at offering clues that quickly narrowed down the category of what the word could be. Though there's fun to be had introducing it to people for the first time, it doesn't do enough to recommend it alongside recent party game hits like *Just One* or classics like *Monikers*. 🎲

**GEORGE BARKER**

**PLAY IT? MAYBE**



# SCOUT

Circus entrepreneurs go for the juggler

Designer: Kei Kajino | Publisher: Oink



If you're not familiar with Oink Games' output, they have been responsible for an instantly recognisable lineup of little-box games that fight against the constraints of their diminutive size with inventive design twists. Titles like *Nine Tiles Panic* and *Startups* combine clean, striking artwork and an offbeat style to create a distinctive house style that often – though not always – results in a memorable experience.

*Scout* is the latest in the range. More than in some previous titles, the theme is more sprinkled over the top than baked into the core mechanics. You have been put in charge of a circus – 'suddenly' as the rulebook would have it – but for some reason you have no acts. So I guess technically you've inherited some striped tents and lorries. Thematically, your job is to hunt for performers – perhaps poaching them from your rivals – put on shows, and rake in some deliciously fungible circus bucks.

Not that this setup offers players any guidance whatsoever in terms of what will actually transpire at the table. Instead, this is a compact little set collection slash hand management card game about picking your battles and pouncing on opportunities when they arise.

At the beginning of each round you'll be dealt a hand of cards. There's the merest whiff of a concession to the theme here – a microscopic piece of text that will say something like 'Singer' or 'Clown'. These cards are your performers. They also have two numbers on them. And here's the first wrinkle that *Scout* introduces, the first flaming chainsaw tossed to your unicyclist to juggle: one number is upside-down, and at the start of the round each player makes the decision whether to keep their hand as it is, or rotate it through 180 degrees and play the cards on the other side.

Secondly, as in the Uwe Rosenberg classic *Bohnanza*, once you've drawn your hand, you must keep



the cards in that order. Your aim is to make sets – groups of the same number or ascending consecutive numbers – but you can't just pick your best cards. Rather, you can pick cards from the latest set played to the table and place them anywhere in your hand. You can put on a show whenever you can beat the set on the table. Pairs and triples etc beat a run of the same size, otherwise higher cards beat lower ones.

You score for each card left in the show you beat, and for each card other players scout from your show to make their own. The player with the most money at the end of the last round wins.

*Scout's* theme is barely present in its mechanics, nor is it evoked by the dual-coloured cards and box. The tiny black icons of trapezes or bicycles are so perfunctory it's almost comical. But this doesn't entirely matter. The art and design might not feel especially circusy, but they are attractive – the little cardboard money tokens feel satisfyingly chunky, and I like how a flipped card – as in *Bohnanza* – itself becomes a token.

After a few rounds, you get a sense for the game's rhythm: shows appear, then collapse as one-by-one their performers are poached by other players, until at last someone can beat what's left with a bigger set. Once per round, each player may scout a card *and* put on a show in the same action, allowing you to net a bunch of cards and guarantee more money as players pay you for your star performers.

It's certainly much better at three to five players than two – the two player version lacks the dynamic feel of higher player counts, the tension of waiting to see if the card you want will make it round to you. I just came away unsure how much *Scout* offers – despite its gimmicks – over traditional set collection fare like *Briscola* and *Rummy*. But that's a niggle, not a fatal flaw. *Scout* makes for an accessible, quick, visually-appealing experience – a solid portable gateway game to break out for a mixed age group with half an hour to spare.

TIM CLARE

PLAY IT? YES

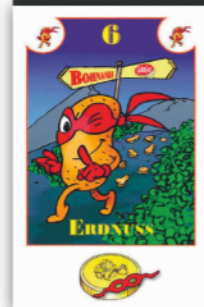


## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 45 Cards
- ▶ Game manual
- ▶ 23 Scout chips
- ▶ 5 Scout & show chips
- ▶ 30 Score chips
- ▶ Starting player marker

## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED BOHMANZA

*Bohnanza* is an obvious ancestor of this kind of hand management, though *Scout* feels less sedate. As mentioned above, *Briscola* – played with an Italian-suited deck – or *Go-Stop* – played with Korean hwatu cards – are old games that offer mechanically similar experiences of playing into a central tableau while trying to score the most over a number of rounds, so if you enjoy them, *Scout* is pitching its tent in broadly the same field.





# MONUMENTS

A monumental shame

**Designer:** Martin Looi | **Publisher:** Keep Exploring Games



**A**ny game that includes a pack of paperclips to hold its star components together raises an eyebrow. And so begins our tour of the standard edition of *Monuments*.

Here, players lead an ancient civilization. They must build a landmark to secure a place in the history books, while fighting opponents for land on a hex-covered map of (some of) the world. *Monuments* follows many civ games by obscuring timelines so the Egyptians, Incas, Greeks and Mayans coexist. Its slight detour is a fleet of modern-day fighter planes – a suspension of belief too far?

Each player assumes their home hex along with a set of civ tokens for spreading out and conquering. These manifest via an action-retrieval hand of ten cards (only one card is played per turn, then must be discarded. Retrieving cards is an action in itself). Resources are generated through worker and factory civ tokens and can be exchanged, along with said workers, to build each stage of a monument. When a layer is complete, bonuses intensify actions – for example, workers get one extra movement. The winner is the person with the most victory points, earned by building monument layers, completing quest cards and having certain items on the board at game's end.

If the mood strikes, you may attack fellow civilizations to accumulate more land. This is key, as each monument layer requires more hexes. However, having played this as a trio – using only the Incas, Egyptians and Greeks as the rules dictate – attacking feels lopsided. Because of their (exaggerated) proximity, the Egyptians and Greeks tend to engage in battle, leaving the Peruvian player undisturbed to fly (!) to the UK or a made-up island near South America. Cartography is not this game's strong suit, as seen elsewhere: the Caribbean is conveniently huge, and Russia has vanished.

There are rumours an expansion pack will fill the gap, but games should



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Game board
- ▶ Colossus of Rhodes monument pieces
- ▶ Lighthouse of Alexandria monument pieces
- ▶ Tikal monument pieces
- ▶ Machu Picchu monument pieces
- ▶ 20 Personal bonus cards
- ▶ 4 Score cards
- ▶ 2 Solo score cards
- ▶ 32 Common bonus cards
- ▶ 4 Ability cards
- ▶ 48 Quest cards
- ▶ 10 Solo quest cards
- ▶ 4 Player boards
- ▶ 40 Action cards
- ▶ 8 Solo action cards
- ▶ 25 Wood tokens
- ▶ 25 Sheep tokens
- ▶ 25 Metal tokens
- ▶ 25 Food tokens
- ▶ 25 Weapon tokens
- ▶ 1 First player crown
- ▶ 25 Bridge/ferry tokens
- ▶ 2 Horse tokens
- ▶ 3 Workshop tokens
- ▶ 3 Farm tokens
- ▶ 60 Workers
- ▶ 12 Forts
- ▶ 12 Towns
- ▶ 12 Factories
- ▶ 12 Air forces
- ▶ 12 Navies
- ▶ 12 Armies
- ▶ 10 Special and 1 normal dice
- ▶ 2 Island and water overlay hexes
- ▶ 1 Score pad



still work independently of upgrades. Same for components. The deluxe versions look better, but the standard edition's aren't fit for purpose. In congress to the colossal board, civ tokens are pinhead small so get lost and overlooked. They're also all the same shape and colour, (i.e. all green, or all blue) making it very difficult to differentiate them on the board. On top of this, illustrations are colour-on-colour, which no trip to Specsavers can solve. A lot of the graphic design, in fact, feels like a prototype – especially the generic player boards. The superior *7 Wonders* shows how beautifully these can be done.

Other snags add delays. Resource images, counter-intuitively, do not tally (food is wheat sheaf on the board, bread on the token; metal is a steel bar on the board, ore on the token) – resulting in pauses and head scratches. Each of the so-called 'special' dice have sharp edges that refuse to roll, sheep are interchangeably referred to as cattle, while vague wording throughout the rule book and on the cards tends to raise more questions than it answers... The back cover sells "smooth and fast" turns but the Mayans certainly wouldn't set their calendars by it.

And then, sigh, the monuments. The very thing workers sweated and died for. Disappointingly made from cardboard boxes with images on all four sides, the sizing is mismatched so the pictures misalign. The boxes also won't sit flush (Mr Colossus of Rhodes gets a gappy face) and are forever being knocked over – hence the paperclip afterthought. The Egyptians might rightly feel miffed the Lighthouse of Alexandria was chosen over, say, the Great Sphinx of Giza, while Incan architects will be spinning in their tombs to discover the top layer of Machu Picchu is just blue sky and clouds.

Somewhere, *somewhere*, in here lurks potential. The retrieval mechanic is, on the whole, successful and the ability to upgrade actions introduces an interesting engine-building element. Overall, *Monuments* – in its standard incarnation, at least – is more 'work in progress' than 'work of art'. **JENNY COX**

## PLAY IT? NO

Too much play is lost to staring at the board trying to tell components apart. The cardboard monuments don't withstand the game let alone the test of time, making *Monuments* memorable for the wrong reasons.

## PLAY IF YOU LIKED... RAPA NUI

While there's only one type of monument in this box, it's a lot more satisfying than *Monuments* misstep.





# YAK

## Track, unpack, stack

**Designer:** Michael Luu | **Publisher:** Pretzel Games



The production quality in *Yak* is off the charts. There are masses of huge wooden blocks, gorgeous tokens, some groovy carts and, of course, the yaks. These yaks are the main attraction, especially the adorable baby yak, which has now taken up permanent residence on my desk. In fact, there are more components than strictly necessary. There's a huge board, which is only really used to create a circle for the Yaks to travel around. It's obsolete: yaks can easily just travel from player to player on the table. There's even a separate board for fog cubes to be placed on. If they'd used some of the vast surplus space on the main board for this, at least it would have a purpose. Frustratingly, the quality of the gameplay doesn't quite live up to the quality of the components.

Your aim is to build a tower with stone acquired from travelling merchants. Stones in eight different colours are transported in wagons pulled by yaks. You pay for stones with milk, meat or bread, but three of the four merchants refuse one type of food, and you can only take stones from the cart in front of you. These restrictions create interesting decisions and work well. Each round, the yaks move the carts in the direction they are facing – to which we

chant "Yakky, Yakky, Yakky..." (this is not in the rules, but should be).

On each round, players simultaneously select one of three action cards. The action cards are slightly confusing as the language-independent graphics aren't intuitive. The simultaneous action selection feels a little superfluous – actions are locked-in but not revealed. Perhaps it's been added to force the structure of the game into rounds, which then provides a natural moment for the yaks to move.

Players do need to plan ahead a bit – working out which stones they want to take and making sure they have the correct resources at the right time in order to do so. But even carefully laid plans can go awry as fog descends. Mixed into the bag, with the stones are identically sized cubes of fog. When these come out, the yaks all change direction, sending the carts the other way and altering the stones heading your way and the food restrictions to obtain them. Knowing that the fog could come out of the bag does make you consider your options a little more carefully. Fog adds just about the right amount of chaos.

When you take stones you immediately place them on your pyramid-shaped tower. At the end of the game, you'll score for groups of stones of the same colour and

for multiple groups of different colour stones. It's quite a fun puzzle for one or two games, but despite advanced mode objective cards, it's not interesting enough to generate real replayability. Players mostly tend to be searching for different colour stones for their towers, so competition is mainly limited to the costly 'crystal stones' which can be any colour and can massively increase your scoring options... so you want to stop your opponents from getting their hands on them. It's the position of these wild stones that sparks most of the interesting choices in the game.

If the game played quickly, the whole thing would work so much better. But unfortunately it tends to drag and can easily take over an hour, which is too long for the simple mechanics and light strategy. 🐉

**ELLIE DIX**

### PLAY IT? MAYBE

The whole game is beautifully (over) produced, though it's actually surprisingly cheap considering the component quality. *Yak* is a family-weight game with a delightful theme and great table presence, but while it is lightly sprinkled with interesting choices, it sadly lacks real depth and variety. It's a bit of a shame that the real highlight is playing with the baby yak and chanting, "Yakky, Yakky, Yakky".

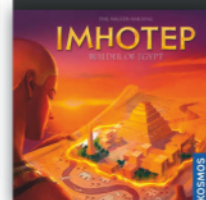


### WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 4 Yaks
- ▶ 1 Baby yak
- ▶ 4 Carts
- ▶ 8 Cart panels
- ▶ 1 Game board
- ▶ 4 Player boards
- ▶ 1 Quarry bag
- ▶ 64 Coloured stones
- ▶ 45 Food tokens
- ▶ 8 Crystal stones
- ▶ 1 Mountain
- ▶ 1 Fog marker
- ▶ 5 Fogs
- ▶ 1 Stupa marker
- ▶ 1 Score pad
- ▶ 12 Action cards
- ▶ 8 Bonus cards

### PLAY THIS IF YOU LIKED: IMHOTEP

Both games have simple mechanics, chunky wooden cubes and tower building, but *Imhotep* trumps *Yak* with its difficult decisions and better interaction between players.







# THE EVERRAIN

## A bit of damp experience

Designer: Adam Smith | Publisher: Grimlord Games



A good board game rulebook becomes obsolete. You read it to learn how to play the game, you may return to it a couple of times to check a rule or a card clarification, but for the most part, it lies at the bottom of the game box, forgotten, while your attention is solely focused on the board game in front of you. What is the sign of the bad rulebook then? Well, clearly the one that completely steals the spotlight from the game and makes you talk about rulebooks for the opening paragraph of a review.

Here is the deal with *The Everrain's* rulebook: it isn't the case of bad writing, or confusing layout or missing rules. It is that having read the rulebook, several times, there was no clear explanation on how to play the game. Sure, there are descriptions of different gameplay elements but no discernible explanation of what to do with them on a player's turn. Having scoured the board game forums and what little help YouTube could offer, I could just about piece together what the game wanted me to do. It was hours of effort and frustration that I would not persevere through unless I had to. So even before I set sail for the first time on the beautifully crafted miniature ship and faced the



### WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 8 Ship miniatures
- ▶ 4 Coloured bases
- ▶ 12 Deckhands miniatures
- ▶ 6 Shellbacks miniatures
- ▶ Avatar of the Under God miniature
- ▶ 15 Enemy miniatures
- ▶ Game board
- ▶ 4 Player ship boards
- ▶ Port board
- ▶ 3 Avatar boards
- ▶ 20 Map tiles
- ▶ 18 Crew boards
- ▶ 3 Storm tiles
- ▶ 180 Gems
- ▶ 334 Cards
- ▶ 283 Tokens
- ▶ 16 Dice



game's tentacled gigantic Under God, I had developed a relationship with the game based on frustration. *The Everrain* would have to work very hard to rehabilitate itself from our first introduction and, to give it its due, it had done its very best to do so.

*The Everrain* is *Eldritch Horror* at sea, if investigators were all captains of their customisable ship and the gameplay was based more in exploration than rolling skill checks. In its cooperative sandbox style gameplay, the players' ships get dropped into the middle of the map from where they can sail and do wherever they want. The goal is to collect clue tokens that will help players progress on the discovery track, ahead of the enemies and hopefully before the big scary sea monster awakens and things get really bad. Because you are meant to explore every interest point on the map and make decisions based on various story elements, there aren't any obviously marked clue earning locations. This brings a genuine sense of wonder to exploration as you never

know what you could discover or encounter next. On the other hand, it also means that it can take a while to progress through the game. Even in its shortest incarnation, eight rounds, the game can last several hours. Larger groups of players and additional rounds increase the timespan exponentially.

Luckily, there are plenty of points of interest for the players to chart their course to. You can plunder the shipwrecks, explore the islands, fight enemy ships or even visit the towns to gamble in a casino or hire more crew. You can also customise your own ship by adding additional rooms below deck or improving your cannons. The puny gunboat at the beginning of the game can turn into a powerful frigate, with a full might to rule *The Everrain's* seas.

The crew are critical to an efficient running of the ship. They can help you sail further or man the cannons in a fight. They also come with their own special abilities and vices. A certain crewmate will help you gather clues more efficiently, but they also have a gambling problem, sneaking away to a casino at every port stop. Accounting for their skills and shortcomings adds an interesting strategic dimension to the game.

Not all sailing in *The Everrain* is smooth. There are some component oddities, and the end of the game could be somewhat anticlimactic if you don't get to face off against the Under God. However, it is incredibly atmospheric, and its sandbox style gameplay offers players almost boundless ways to play the game. There is only one tip to enjoy *The Everrain* to its absolute fullest: find someone who already knows the rules. 1

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

### PLAY IT? MAYBE

*The Everrain* offers a world full of mysteries and dark beauty, but to enjoy it you will first need to conquer the game's biggest adversary, its rulebook, in a fight that will take a lot of perseverance!

### TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED ELDRITCH HORROR

What could make a hopeless search for the clues to the mystery of a deadly gigantic ancient monster better? Only that you can do it while drinking rum on the deck of your own ship.



# TUSK!: SURVIVING THE ICE AGE

A cold snap everyone can enjoy

Designer: Sean Goodison & Mike Haught | Publisher: Gale Force Nine



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 37 Terrain tiles
- ▶ 16 Tribe meeples
- ▶ Mammoth meeple
- ▶ 4 Dice
- ▶ 18 Season cards
- ▶ 9 Victory cards
- ▶ 4 Tribe boards
- ▶ Hunt board

**T**USK! asks us to separate the hunters from the gatherers in the scramble for resources. Here, we're setting out a board of hexes, some of which have materials and food to collect on them, before slapping a mammoth down in the centre. Players are attempting to gather as much food (presented as cartoony legs of ham) or the materials to improve their chances of a big haul from the hunt.

mammoth strikes back, possibly wounding your characters. After all of that the mammoth goes for a wander, maybe flattening a few of your tribespeople.

All of this is pretty straightforward, but the way the board grows each round makes for an interesting sense of exploration. And soon, with multiple tribespersons wandering the

of the board is seven tiles means that the ice age is more cold snap than a glacial approach. It turns the game from a fairly gentle Euro-with-some-dice-combat game to something closer to Fortnite – the end of the shrinking world quickly pushing players into more desperate situations.

This makes it one of those weird hybrid games that offers just a taste of various mechanics – pushing your luck with dice rolls, worker placement, destructive



Each round your intrepid tribe chooses whether to commit members to the hunt, add members to the board, or wander off and do something gathering. Expanding your tribe simply means paying the cost and getting additional meeples to work with, and gathering is a case of going places and taking the materials you want. But the hunt is the most exciting part – here players will be committing materials (like pointy sticks) and then rolling dice to see if they managed to track and slice off a bit of delicious mammoth. The materials help with dice manipulation, or getting extra 'hits' (and therefore food). Then the

board the game speeds up from its early sedate pace. But, it wouldn't be a game with *that* subtitle without a chilly turn. Midway through the game the ice age turns up. Initially players roll for which direction it's coming from, flipping every tile to its ice-covered side, suddenly these tiles are worthless and the hunting phase becomes the most important thing you're going to do on your turn. After the first turn cards are flipped to show how many rows, from the same direction, will be turned to ice. This ranges from zero to two, which when the widest part

boards and so on. The shape of the game, after the first play, offers up tons of tactical choices as you and other players feel out the coming threat. Unlike some of Gale Force Nine's recent lighter boxes (we're not bashing *Dune* here), *TUSK!* absolutely delivers a great family game experience. **CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT**

## PLAY IT? YES

Silly, occasionally mean, and a little bit frantic – everything you'd expect from having to downsize with a woolly mammoth.

## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED SURVIVE: ESCAPE FROM ATLANTIS!

A step up for fans of this self-destructing-board classic





# ESPRESSO DOPPIO

**Designer:** Walter Obert | **Publisher:** HUCH!



A game that might be happiest on the shelves of IKEA, *Espresso Doppio* is one of the few games I am aware of that comes with its own crockery. Yes, inside this box are three sets of espresso cups and saucers in inoffensive white, brown and black. Yes, they're real. Yes, you could drink your coffee out of them if you wanted to – even while playing the game itself. Should you? Probably not. Aside from the cups and saucers are three similarly coloured plastic spoons, some

points cards and coffee bean tokens to count up your points.

Each round involves you trying to create one of your goal cards in front of you by carefully, moving and swapping around items in the five slots in front of you. You might be trying to line up three items in a row of the same colour (spoon, cup, saucer) to complete one of your cards, or just any lonely cup without any other items. Of course, on your opponent's turn they're doing the same thing, so it feels like trying to solve a Rubik's cube when one person is attempting to work on a different side.

While the novelty of the game offers an initial diversion, we found the game dragged, and the usual feeling of digging into an abstract puzzle against someone else wasn't strong enough to make things work. +

**CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT**

**PLAY IT? NO**

# FROG SOUP

**Designer:** Jean Philippe Sahut | **Publisher:** BoardM Factory



The life-cycle of a plastic Christmas cracker frog is a sad one. Following a sentence of over eleven months isolation - imprisoned in a dark, flimsy cylinder - their liberation suddenly erupts with a bang as they're flung across a carcass-strewn table. Presuming they haven't perished at the bottom of a gravy jug, they'll spend the next five minutes being eagerly prodded in the sacral region until their knee-jerk explosions of movement render them lost forever. Somehow, it has taken until now to reconfigure the true purpose of these sorry creatures... as novel components of a tabletop dexterity game.

*Frog Soup* is a simple, cooperative game for children and families, utilising oversized yet familiar plastic frogs. As a team, players will be helping their frogs escape from the bubbling threat of a witch's cauldron by having them knock down several

object standees dotted around it. At the start of each round the first player will add one of six ingredient tiles to the cauldron before having their frog perform three jumps. Objects must be toppled in the order indicated on

the circle surrounding the witch. If players knock down all objects before the final ingredient is added, the frogs escape their fate.

Whilst the premise is simple, in practice *Frog Soup* is occasionally tricky. Frogs are unpredictable – more so than the similarly functioning discs or meeples of other dexterity games – making bad turns feel very frustrating and victory particularly satisfying. It's worth noting that if played upon a table, the frogs will fall off – a lot. On the other hand, if played on a carpeted floor the frogs will hardly jump at all.

To conclude, *Frog Soup's* core gimmick and table presence should be a fun distraction for most kids, but be prepared for some moments of frustration for both adults and younger players. +

**CHAD WILKINSON**

**PLAY IT? MAYBE**





# 1920 WALL STREET

**Designer:** Perepau Llistosella | **Publisher:** Looping Game



As stock market games go, *1920 Wall Street* sits in an awkward middle ground. If the theme is unappealing to you, nothing in the game will make it more attractive. Although the game's look and artwork are perfectly serviceable, it lacks the charm of *Startups* or the sly humour of *Racoon Tycoon*.

Yet if you are an experienced investor, looking to test your savvy with a share manipulation game, you may find *1920 Wall Street's* gameplay on a lighter side. Moving around a rondel made from stock cards, players purchase shares of various goods or manipulate their worth on an adjacent market board. The stocks are only worth points at the end of the game if players managed to draft a minimum number of cards required for each specific good. And, of course, the value of each good depends on their worth at the end of game. Each game will

also be influenced by one bad effect that could dramatically change the winners and losers for the game.

Although there are plenty of ways to manipulate the game, it feels like a strange tug-of-war stalemate: as one player raises the price of corn stock up, another brings it down, for it to be raised later again... and then be brought down. It may be not very exciting, but at least it feels thematically accurate!

*1920 Wall Street* ends on a bomb, as in, quite literally, a card representing a bomb, in a somewhat clumsy attempt to reference the tragic events of the Wall Street Bombing at the Financial District. Players count their stocks and tally up victory points in a much less dramatic manner. This is a game of a few



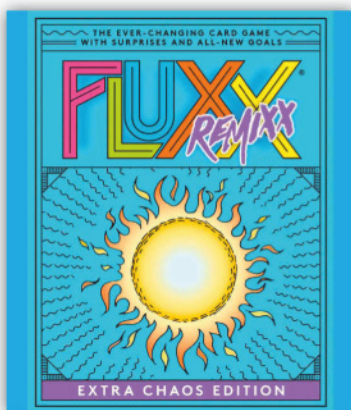
highs (the rondel mechanism) and a couple of lows (the presentation and the bombing reference), averaging out in something that is just fine. 🍌

**ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA**

**PLAY IT? MAYBE**

# FLUXX REMIXX

**Designer:** Andrew Looney | **Publisher:** Looney Labs



Since its original release in 1997, Looney Labs' *Fluxx* has been adapted countless times across a multitude of themes and intellectual properties. This latest iteration though harks back to its simple origins whilst presenting some twists to the formula.

For those unfamiliar, *Fluxx* is a card game about change. And I

mean this in the most literal sense. Indeed, *Fluxx* – in all its forms – has never been about any deeper educational, political, or emotional examinations of change, instead choosing to embody the word in a purely mechanical sense. Each game begins with players taking turns to draw and play one card and no definitive win condition. Over time, new rules will arise along with an ever-changing lineup of goal cards, each one depicting the required pair of Keeper cards needed to finally win the game.

Chaos would be the word I'd best ascribe to my experiences of playing various versions of *Fluxx*, so seeing *Fluxx Remixx's* sub-heading of 'Extra Chaos Edition' was daunting to say the least. Ultimately though, this mainly amounts to the addition of Surprise cards, opening up possibilities for playing out of turn. As such, anyone familiar with the game should jump

straight into this with ease. In fact, thanks to its simple and, by now, timeless design, newcomers should have little trouble either.

But, whilst the game is undoubtedly accessible in regard to its rules, some might consider the lack of a definitive theme a touch off-putting. With so many other variants on the market catering to specific fandoms and consumers of popular media, it's hard to picture *Fluxx Remixx* taking precedence. Furthermore, in this reviewer's opinion, licensed versions of *Fluxx* have managed to generate at least some element of thematic involvement compared to the original, which is no easy task considering the game's mechanical nature. Consequently, this is one for the purists and collectors. 🍌

**CHAD WILKINSON**

**PLAY IT? MAYBE**





# SWITCH & SIGNAL

Points mean prizes

Designer: David Thompson | Publisher: Kosmos



We're all familiar with the Trolley Problem – the somewhat unlikely moral dilemma where pulling a lever diverts a train onto a side track where it will slay a mere one human instead of five. *Switch & Signal* asks, arguably, the more urgent philosophical question: what if no lives were in peril, but some haulage companies might get very ticked off?

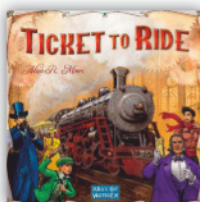
Welcome to a cooperative game where you and up to four train-loving pals (or train-loathing mortal enemies, if you're prepared to put aside your differences for the duration) try to guide a variety of locomotives through a spaghetti of continental European railways, picking up freight from the big cities and running it down south to the port at Marseilles.

But you don't get to control the trains once they're unleashed from their sheds, not really. Instead, they rattle along the tracks like hamsters through a maze and it's your job to switch points and change red lights to green to steer them where you want them to go, making sure they don't crash into each other or run



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Double-sided game board
- ▶ 100 Cards
- ▶ 9 Trains
- ▶ 12 Goods pieces
- ▶ 5 Dice
- ▶ 10 Signal discs
- ▶ 30 Switch tiles
- ▶ 10 Time tiles
- ▶ 11 Location tiles
- ▶ 3 Cover tiles



through stop signals or wander off the line altogether.

The mechanisms for play are deceptively simple: each turn you're going to flip a card, which gets you to place a new train in one of the starting areas or move one colour of existing train. There are three train types: slow, medium, and express. The slow trains' low-numbered dice mean it takes ages to get anywhere, but you've got more time to set up their route. Express trains create a constant slew of crises but they get to their destinations quickly.

And that matters, because if you don't get all your freight delivered before the deck runs out, you lose. Players also get a hand of cards that let you change signals, switch points, or roll dice to move trains onwards on their journeys. Whenever a train overruns a red light or collides with another, you lose clock tokens – for every seven you lose, you discard a card from the top of the deck that acts

as your timer: which is pretty grim, as you're on a tight schedule.

*Switch & Signal* manages somehow to be intense, intricate and brain-burny, yet oddly relaxing. The central puzzle is engaging, and the difficulty – which can be tweaked once you feel confident – is more consistent than a lot of co-op games, though luck still plays a part in whether a train will squeak through that junction or smash into the back of another.

Every time we played, players became genuinely emotionally invested in getting our massive rail network to run to schedule. You find yourself stroking your chin and looking with worry at the route through Germany. Does the Amsterdam express have enough spare track before it hits that junction outside Berlin? Was it a mistake sending that little branch line stopper via Paris so close to the shipping deadline? *Switch & Signal* (if you want to make it sound more hardcore to your friends you can call it SAS) creates a reality in which these questions matter to you.

If it falls down anywhere, it's on the cooperative side. *Switch & Signal* is, fundamentally, a one-player puzzle. Each player gets their own hand of cards, but with only three types in the whole deck and the ability to discard any two to take any action, you're all acting with the same information and powers. This also means newer players may find themselves simply carrying out the plans of more experienced ones.

But this is no deal-breaker. The central puzzle is fun, intricate and just the right amount of stressful. On the reverse of the board is a whole new American map with different destinations for the freight and different powers for the three special actions you can take to get yourself out of a bind. Overall, this is a flavourful co-op game with plenty to choo-choo on. 🚂

TIM CLARE

PLAY IT? YES

## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED TICKET TO RIDE

*Switch & Signal*'s rules are pretty simple to grasp, aided by the strong theme (though admittedly we managed to get them wrong the first two times we played), so it makes a solid introduction to co-operative games for groups who enjoyed *Ticket to Ride*.



# KEY TO THE KINGDOM

Rolling through the nineties

**Designer:** Matthew O'Malley & Ben Rosset | **Publisher:** Restoration Games



**W**hen hunting for vintage classics there's really only two options: eBay or charity shops. Typically, this translates to either possessing deep pockets or considerable luck - although a keen eye is also an invaluable tool for the latter. But, for those not fooled by the fragile veil of nostalgia, Restoration Games offers an easier alternative.

Following on from the successful reigns of *Fireball Island* and *Dark Tower*, Restoration Games set their sights on overhauling the 1990 fantasy classic *The Key to the Kingdom*. This family-friendly adventure game will thrust players into a whimsical world of

the game's Adventure Atlas; a separate book providing tongue in cheek, Python-esque doses of theme alongside specific instructions. Before long, players will likely be able to recall the requirements of certain spaces without need for the Atlas, but it's a very much welcome resource nonetheless.

Despite its novel idea of a fold-out realm, the original was nonetheless beset by the usual limitations of the

Other luck mitigating factors include the event deck's numerous 'companions'. When encountered, these comical supporting cast members - pulled from a variety of myths, folklore, and fairytales - will join your side upon a successful roll of the dice (again, items can be used to modify the result). Alongside providing an ongoing special power, their card will detail which key adventure they can assist with, making progress along its path slightly easier.

Thanks to this increased sense of agency, there's fewer instances of die related frustration, and adults should have no problems

childlike wonder, as they take on the roles of unlikely heroes competing to put an end to the fearsome Demon King. By travelling the lands in search of adventure, players will gradually assemble the titular key needed to storm the Demon King's domain, ascend his imposing castle, and finally brave battle in the throne room.

Fans of the original will appreciate the return of *The Key to the Kingdom's* distinctive folding board and gimmicky 'portal' cut-outs. These spaces work much the same, with anyone entering them triggering a momentous unfolding and expanding of the land, revealing the board's full sprawl beneath and offering new routes to the game's 'key adventures'. These key adventures as well as the numerous minor adventures are fully detailed in

roll and move genre - a mechanic that feels especially dated today. But rather than do away with the mechanic altogether, the publishers have chosen to live up to their name and simply restore and revitalise it. Players will still be rolling a die on their turn, albeit with the option of modifying the result with one of their eight starting hero's items. These range from +1/-1 lengths of rope to mighty +4/-4 swords, with other possibilities available through any magic items found. Once used, items become exhausted although the game offers plenty of opportunities for replenishing them, most notably through a 'hero's nap'.

staying immersed in the game along with younger players. This is in part helped by some spectacular writing throughout, covering a comedic breadth ranging from cringe to laugh out loud funny (getting Rick-rolled by a very familiar bard remains one of my favourite gaming moments).

Aesthetically, *Key to the Kingdom* evokes childhood, and incredibly well. The illustrations here have the atmosphere of a beloved, fantastical story book, and the minds of young players will undoubtedly dive deep into any elements catching their eye. Pairing this with the overall simplicity and lessened reliance on luck makes for a perfect slice of family game night fun. **CHAD WILKINSON**

## PLAY IT? YES

Charming, funny, and well written, this is easily one of the best roll and move family games we've encountered.



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 2 Magical game boards
- ▶ 5 Hero figures
- ▶ 5 Hero dice
- ▶ 5 Hero cards
- ▶ Demon king's castle board
- ▶ Demon die
- ▶ 9 Demon king's castle tokens
- ▶ 40 Item tokens
- ▶ 5 Magic item tokens
- ▶ 36 Event cards
- ▶ 15 Key pieces
- ▶ Adventure atlas

## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED KEY TO THE KINGDOM (1990)

This modern reimagining eclipses the nostalgic luck-fest that is the original.







# MEEPLES & MONSTERS

Bag yourself a hero

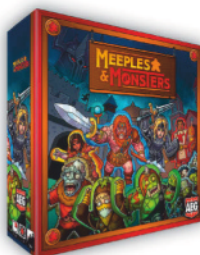
**Designer:** Ole Steiness | **Publisher:** Alderac Entertainment Group



**B**ags are becoming more commonplace in the tabletop industry. Whilst occasionally they'll serve as fancy storage solutions, more often than not, they're functional additions, allowing for blind draws of chips and tokens as an alternative to dice randomisation. *Meebles & Monsters* falls under the latter, albeit with the glorious decision to forgo tokens in favour of infinitely more tactile meeples.

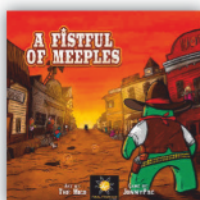
*Meebles & Monsters* is the latest from *Champions of Midgard* designer Ole Steiness – and for anyone who's played that 2015 hit, the premise here might sound familiar. Essentially, hordes of monsters have been plaguing the town of Rowan, and it is down to the players to hit back with a fusion of luck and worker-placement mechanics as they strive to become the new Earl Marshall. Of course, the aesthetic and theme is notably more family oriented here (our heroes are literal meeples, as are the various beasts), but the game's main deviation is its use of bag-building mechanics.

Over the course of the game, players will be supplementing an initial bag of peasants with increasingly more powerful forces, represented by a variety of coloured meeples and their associated Hero Cards. A number of meeples (generally ranging from four to six) will be drawn each turn and



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 152 Meeples
- ▶ 47 Monster cards
- ▶ 44 Quest cards
- ▶ 28 Hero cards
- ▶ 15 Location tiles
- ▶ 12 Player markers
- ▶ 4 Player boards
- ▶ 6 Dark council bonus tokens
- ▶ 4 Cloth bags
- ▶ 2 First player tokens
- ▶ Final encounter scoreboard
- ▶ City board



subsequently placed out on the central board's worker placement spots.

The board displays a cartoonish aerial view of Rowan, with various buildings offering opportunities to gain new meeples, quest cards, and bolster existing forces. Up to eight additional buildings can be constructed by players, adding more variety to the board and granting crucial bonuses when built. Furthermore, bordering each of the town's four regions are an ever-replenishing number of monsters, which, when assigned to, yield the victory points needed to win.

For better or worse, battling monsters also acts as the game's timer, with the monster deck being seeded with a trio of 'Dark Council' cards – the third of which signalling the last rounds. Often though, the monsters waiting at the sidelines pose too little of a threat to be engaged with swiftly, leading to a fairly mechanical feeling game arc of improving your engine, building all the worker placement spots, and *then* fending off monsters. Whilst overflowing regions do run the risk of weighing players' bags down with fleeing peasants (an inconvenient but nicely thematic mechanic), having more of an incentive to attack

consistently would aid the game's general flow and length of play.

One of the most interesting elements of the bag building is the option for levelling up each of the four main hero meeples, increasing their strength and unlocking various abilities. Certain worker placement spots on the board will also open up opportunities to enlist even more help in the form of Prestige Heroes, whose powerful presence can prove invaluable...if and when they're drawn from the bag.

Overall, this process of growing and refining a small army in a bag and eagerly dipping in and out of it remains consistently exciting and addictive. Visualise, for a moment, plunging your hand into a cloth bag and grasping a fistful of wooden figurines as they gently clack about your fingers. Feels good doesn't it? Indeed, depending on the amount of 'refinement' carried out during the game, players bags will end up with a generously hefty haul of peasants and heroes, and seeing their varied colours spilled out on the tabletop serves as a nice visual recap of players' chosen strategies alongside being simply satisfying. Ultimately, forget tokens, cubes, and chips – this is how bag building should be done. ●

**CHAD WILKINSON**

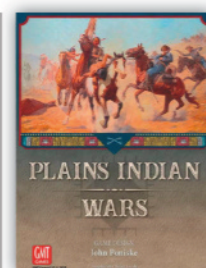
## PLAY IT? YES

This is a fun, but lengthy, merging of mechanics, suited to both experienced players and families. Although I can't help but think that the game's hobby-specific title is limiting its audience somewhat.

## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED A FISTFUL OF MEEPLES

Worth a shot if you're after a similarly tactile worker placement experience.





## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Game board
- ▶ 60 Tarot-size faction cards
- ▶ 10 Custom faction dice
- ▶ 7 Draw discs
- ▶ Draw bag
- ▶ 190 Wooden faction cubes

# PLAINS INDIAN WARS

## Imperial settlers

**Designer:** John Poniske | **Publisher:** GMT Games



**P**lains Indian Wars, despite its wargame looking appearance (read: mostly different kinds of brown and green) is a jolly and asymmetric game that is entirely accessible. As the name suggests it simplifies the wars and conflicts created by the invading settlers of the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century into Native American land.

There are four factions in every game – the Northern and Southern Plains Indians who take up their respective top and bottom borders, The Cavalry, and the settlers. The goal of the native players is simply to stop the invaders and scupper the creation of the railroad and various settler routes across the country, holding as much land as possible. The Cavalry is a protective kind of police force for the settler faction, who, while weaker and slower, are the main way of progressing the railway – a major win condition for the invading factions.

The game uses randomised turns using a bag-draw system – draw your faction colour and it's your

turn – and the combat is wonderfully simple. Roll up to two dice against your opponent (with some minor advantages to the Native players who sometimes get night attacks) and tot up the casualties, repeat until a truce is made (there's parlay symbols for that, which you'll want to match) or you've murdered each other. Each turn players may also play cards from their hand, and replace them with as many – these are the classic event and mustering cards you'd expect, with a little historical flourish. Wagons, when the white disc is drawn, spawn on the eastern side of the board and then every wagon on the board moves forward one area.

What history lends wargames is often asymmetry and a natural narrative. Here it's the building of the railway. A section can only be added to if there are settlers on either side of a section – equally, once built, settlers can be deployed in these areas – offering a kind of permanent advance. The layout of the board means there's a natural war sandwich going on – or maybe one of those

burgers that tries to slip out of the bun. The invading player (burger) pushes along the central line, or protects their trade routes, and the Native players attempt to whittle them down (applying too much pressure to the bun), or cut off their main access points (using a knife and fork? Maybe this metaphor doesn't work). There is also a simplified solo mode that's got a very natural flow to it, with straightforward 'roll a dice to place enemies' logic (although, you'll have to supply your own D12). This is as satisfying as the multiplayer game in its straightforwardness.

A surprisingly light game for what is a serious subject, with all the hallmarks of something that is best enjoyed with old friends, a few refreshments and probably an interesting new snack. Delightful. ●

**CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT**

## PLAY IT? YES

A wonderfully smooth playing game of area control, conflict and dice rolling. Great for those who just like a good ruckus, as well as those who will enjoy the history presented here.

## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED 300: EARTH & WATER...

If you enjoyed the natural push and pull of this tiny little wargame, then the expanded scope of *Plains Indian Wars* will be right up your track.





# GUTENBERG

Like clockwork

**Designer:** Katarzyna Cioch & Wojciech Wiśniewski | **Publisher:** Portal Games

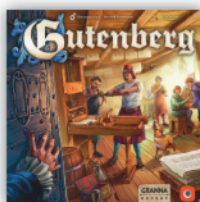


**T**he term 'elegant' gets thrown around a lot in board games. Often it's a synonym for 'this rule or component saved us some headaches' but every now and then a game arrives where every aspect of its design delivers perfectly on its intent.

*Gutenberg* is one such elegantly made Eurogame. Players are leaders in the printing press industry which took the 15th century by storm, seeking fame and fortune by sourcing new orders whilst gathering the necessary supplies and knowledge to complete them.

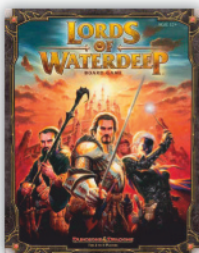
Firstly, this game's physical design and production is some of the best I've ever seen. The game proudly advertises itself as "without plastic" and it absolutely means it. Begone tiny bags for every little component, for here are fantastic cardboard chests ready to be filled with cards, wooden cubes and incredible 3D lettertype tiles. It's a credit to the publisher's commitment to an environmentally conscious creation that, in a world where many companies still overload their creations with plastic detritus, is a welcome step to a more sustainable future.

In play, the game captures the best parts of engine building and contract fulfilling games. You start off with a couple of print orders demanding vowels and decorations. To fulfil these orders you must have the necessary type tiles (i.e. letter blocks), speciality levels and ink, the latter two being



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Double-sided main Board
- ▶ 4 Printing house boards
- ▶ 4 Initiative boards
- ▶ 4 Screens
- ▶ 10 Character tiles
- ▶ 140 Game cards
- ▶ 40 3D Wooden letter block types
- ▶ First Player token
- ▶ 32 Cardboard gears
- ▶ 127 Cardboard tokens
- ▶ Hessian bag
- ▶ 75 Wooden tokens



optional extras to the mandatory tile requirement, but are also essential if you want to be earning game winning fame points. Each order completed earns you coins that buy more types and ink, expanding your future point production. However, before you can fulfil your orders, you need the necessary infrastructure to complete them, which is where our action auction comes in.

Everything that can be done to improve your printing press must first be secretly bid on using influence tokens. Each round starts with players deciding which actions to prioritise or even skip over entirely. You may want to snatch up the perfect array of ink for your orders, but do you want it more than levelling up a speciality skill? By committing your choices in secret, it adds a deduction element to the game, trying to determine how much your opponents will want to take certain actions, to best array your influence cubes.

One such action allows players to add cogs to their game board. Each round begins with the first cog on a

player's board being turned clockwise, with each meshed cog itself turning to reveal a new bonus action that the player can choose to take once this round. The player who can find a way to best optimise their cogs to ensure they can sneak that extra advantage will put themselves in a much more likely position to win.

The gameplay ebbs and flows in sync with players contemplating. Whilst the first person to an action may have a wider variety of options, often that same player will commit heavily to ensure they go first, having already spotted a point

building combination. Likewise, as the order of progression between actions is fixed, the downtime between things happening is dramatically reduced, keeping a quicker pace than one would expect from a calculating Eurogame such as this.

It sounds like I'm describing every good Eurogame combined into one, which in a way, I kind of am. *Gutenberg* feels familiar whilst still being refreshing, rewarding careful thought but never burdening players with excessive downtime, delivering an elegant fusion of mechanics into a thought provoking, great looking experience. An absolute triumph that's a delight to look at and play in equal measure. 🍷

**MATTHEW VERNALL**

## PLAY IT? MUST-PLAY

Fitting for a game about printing, *Gutenberg* compresses the best aspects of several beloved Eurogames into a polished game that delivers a beautifully presented and highly engrossing title. Magnificent.

## PLAY IF YOU LIKED LORDS OF WATERDEEP

Both games see players fighting to successfully complete the best contracts first, slowly amassing resources to better deliver on more valuable orders. If you ever wished you could keep some of the adventurers between quests, *Gutenberg* ostensibly delivers on this desire to constantly improve and take on bigger and better challenges.



# LUNAR BASE

Cut-throat card engines on the moon.

**Designer:** Kaido Koort, Martin Paroll, Silver Türk, Joosep Simm | **Publisher:** Plepic Games



I love the experience of engine-building in a game. You start with painfully limited options, each action feeling frustratingly weak. Slowly, piece-by-piece, you place successive elements which feed off each other, to grant more resources and bonus actions. Finally, it culminates into a dizzying chain reaction of competitive construction. *Lunar Base*, from Estonia's *Plepic Games*, condenses this mechanic down into a lightning fast game of competitive strategy.

The setting of *Lunar Base* is - to no one's surprise - the moon. You play rival corporations, greedily expanding your modular empires across the surface, racing to hit goals of wealth, population or scientific endeavour. New modules link together through coloured orbs, each representing a different goal, but also the cost of placing modules. For example, a Telescope requires 4 red Science orbs to place, or else you pay the difference in credits. But once installed, those orbs are here to

stay, meaning that next time you can build Scientific modules without paying a penny. This mechanism is simple, neat, and thematic, encouraging you to exponentially lunge towards one goal, sometimes at the painful expense of another.

There's a lot to love about *Lunar Base*. It has world-class design which manages to be enticing and efficient throughout, from the Orb colours to the action iconography on each card. There are nods to humour and to general space nerdery; personal favourites being the Laika Memorial, commemorating the first dog in space; and the indispensable Bacon Printer, a culmination of everything humanity and technology have been working towards since the Stone Age.

The cards themselves are intentionally exactly twice as tall as they are wide, to allow you to

bolt them to each other in multiple arrangements. Building a base is cathartic, challenging and more than a tad cute.

Fans of pure strategy might not enjoy *Lunar Base* as much as meatier classics like *Agricola* or *Race for the Galaxy*; this game gives luck a slightly larger role than its bigger cousins. That said, the charmingly quick play times means you rarely mind losing, since you can get through a two player game in just ten or fifteen minutes. It scales up to higher player counts elegantly too, with quick rounds and more cards leaving little downtime; and unique starter stations allow just the right amount of variety between colonies.

The only blemish in an otherwise strong offering is the included expansion, *Influences*. It adds an additional win condition, being the first to bring four Influences into play; an abstract representation of the political forces facing the world. However, they add imbalance to the game, often unpredictably favouring one player over the others, without rewarding the strategy that led them to that point. We soon decided the game was better without it. This is no great loss, since the base game manages to be addictive and

replayable on its own merits.

Lunar Base may not be perfect, but I also

can't recall any game where we have so consistently finished a round... then played again. This delicious combination of prettiness, play and printable foodstuffs almost guarantees fun for the majority of game groups. ●

**CHRIS LOWRY**

## PLAY IT? MUST-PLAY

One of the most more-ish games I've played this year; you'll lose by a whisker, and immediately have another go. Plus, there's as much bacon as you can print.



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 6 credit counters
- 90 cards, including 6 Stations
- 50 Modules,
- 26 Agents,
- 8 Influences



## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED STAR REALMS...

...Both excel at two player strategic card-play in a sci-fi setting. *Lunar Base* handles additional players better, whilst *Star Realms* has a huge library of expansions for advanced play.





# CELLULOSE

Under the microscope

**Designer:** John Coveyou & Steve Schlepphorst | **Publisher:** Genius Games



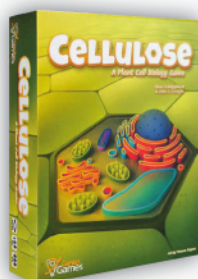
Games often take epic events or whole eras as their themes: a key historic battle, the development of a major city over many years, even the rise of human civilisation over centuries. *Cellulose* goes in the opposite direction, zooming down to find challenge and drama in the tiniest and most everyday of settings: a plant cell.

If you've encountered previous titles from Genius Games, like *Genotype* – where players take the role of monks under the tutelage of Mendel, studying the genetic heritage of peas – you'll have some idea of what to expect. Genius Games have taken the radical approach of publishing games with an educational slant where the game aspect isn't just a lazy afterthought. These are mid-to-heavyweight euros with attractive components and a reasonable amount of crunch.

*Cellulose* is a worker placement game, where you'll be placing a limited number of markers to take actions, acquire and spend resources, and accumulate victory points (technically 'Health Points', but no one but the most pedantic theme stickler is going to insist on calling them that). Resources are things like water and protein, and there's a tableau of cards along the bottom of the board which you can grab to get bonus victory points at the end of the game and sometimes additional actions.

There's also a 'root and shoot' board where you can advance your markers up a plant's stems or down its roots, earning a recurring bonus the farther you go. There are – appropriately – branching paths; you can opt for an early payoff or advance down one of the longer roots which offers worse rewards earlier on but bigger ones later.

Admittedly, as with *Genotype*, some of the science does make early playthroughs a bit challenging, as you're having to learn several things simultaneously: the rules themselves, the terminology used in the game, and then the logic of the theme and how



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Double-sided game board
- ▶ Double-sided plant board
- ▶ 46 Cell component cards
- ▶ Water level marker
- ▶ First player marker
- ▶ 45 Water cubes
- ▶ 30 CO2 cubes
- ▶ 25 Protein cubes
- ▶ 8 6x Water markers
- ▶ 6 6x CO2 markers
- ▶ 15 Plant growth hormone tokens
- ▶ 25 Carbohydrate tokens
- ▶ 25 ATP tokens
- ▶ 8 Extra resource tokens
- ▶ 31 Player pieces (5 sets)
- ▶ 2 Scenario cards
- ▶ 4 Evening phase reminder tokens
- ▶ 5 Players aids
- ▶ 1 Double-sided solo mat
- ▶ 16 Solo cards
- ▶ Solo player aid
- ▶ Science behind Cellulose booklet



that informs the mechanisms.

In some games a familiar theme helps you remember rules: if you want wood you go to the 'forest' space, then you can use that wood to make a cabin on the 'hut builder' space. With *Cellulose*, for most players it's not going to be immediately, intuitively obvious that you want to go to the Mitochondria with carbohydrates to generate ATP, which can make that first rules explanation a bit of rocky teach.

This is just something to be aware of, rather than a criticism per se. It would be perverse to complain that an educational game requires you to learn stuff. It's just that some of that learning is going to have to happen before you even start. It's not completely impenetrable, it's just an extra layer that requires a little more effort from players before you start.

After that, what reveals itself is a pretty fun worker placement game. There's a nice area control mechanic with water with rewards at the end of each round, and the cards add variance and some opportunities for

simple combos when you pick up multiple cards with the same colour.

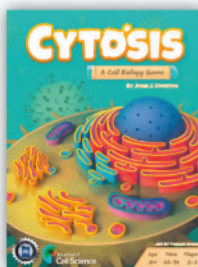
On the downside, it doesn't feel brilliantly tuned for a variety of player counts. The board is double-sided, with a different layout for 1-3, but with just 2 players it can feel a little baggy. The overall arc of the game can feel a bit uneven, too. Once you've maxed out the root and shoot board, that spot becomes useless to you, meaning everyone's routes for scoring points narrow, and not in a tension-building or interesting way. It means that the final round can feel a little anticlimactic.



This is partly because, aside from grabbing cards and advancing on the root and shoot track, you don't have any econ engine of your own that you're developing throughout the game. There's not much sense of progression, just grabbing points from building the cell wall then heading off to grab more CO2 and water. It's definitely a fun and interesting way to learn the key processes behind how a plant cell works, but if you're not interested in the educational side there are tighter, crunchier worker placement options out there. 🍌

**TIM CLARE**

**PLAY IT? MAYBE**



## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED CYTOSIS

Fans of previous Genius Games titles like *Genotype* will appreciate the attention to detail and supplementary booklet explaining the science behind the game – particularly if you liked *Cytosis*, from which *Cellulose* borrows some of its mechanisms and feel.





# MILLE FIORI

Not quite a classic

**Designer:** Reiner Knizia | **Publisher:** Schmidt Spiele



There is such an unalloyed joy in simplicity. A simplicity that gives birth to profundity is even better. It's alchemy. You can see all of the component parts laid out before you but when they're combined something else emerges. Something bamboozling and joyful. Something delicious. Very much like spag bol.

No one holds to this credo in board games more than Reiner Knizia. A designer that refuses to bow to the modern trend of *whack as much in as possible and see if it works*. His designs are always crystal clean but there is this indefinable something, some ludological bay leaf that transforms his simple ideas into magic.

That's when he's at his best. He's not at his best with Mille Fiori. He's close but I think he's forgotten to add that little bit of sugar to round out the dish.

The simplicity is there though. The board is divided into six areas, each one with spaces for the players' transparent, rhomboid markers. When a marker is placed different scoring will occur depending on the area and if further unique conditions are met players can earn bonus actions that, eventually, will start to chain resulting in even more actions.

Your tokens get on the board by use of a drafting system that anyone who's played Seven Wonders will be familiar

with. You take the card you want, play it and pass the rest of your hand on.

This is a game that highlights why Knizia is such a strange beast in today's gaming world. While the other big designers seek to complicate their designs, Knizia still trammels a path of profound simplicity and while this game isn't quite as simple as his underrated classic, Blue Lagoon, Mille Fiori is a game that can be taught in five minutes but is a real challenge to be good at.

Also, Knizia designs thrive on player interaction. Like Blue Lagoon, so many of your best laid plans can be scuppered by the interference of those inconsiderate so and sos around the table. That is why you need to be able to clamber into the minds of your opponents and try to divine what they want to do, not so much to mess up their plans but ensure they don't mess up yours. Like so many of his games, a lot of the complexity lives above the table, not on it.

This is not a perfect game though. My biggest issue with it is the drafting system. It feels like it's been bolted on to the game and you can see the join. The biggest issue is that this kind of drafting hugely advantages those with better memories and if you had a youth as misspent as mine then your short term memory will betray you

every time. Also, when you're drawing from such a large deck of cards you simply might not draw the cards you need which can result in much under the breath mumbling.

Also, if spatial acuity isn't your thing then this game can feel frustrating. I found myself always limping at the back of the scoring track simply because my pattern recognition isn't good. Also, I'm terrifically bad at games.

That is why I'm cautious about *Mille Fiori*. It is a game that leverages certain innate skills in people and that's why it probably isn't for everyone.

As a result I admire this game but I don't love it. This might be down to my own shortcomings but your own shortcomings are always something to dwell on when choosing your leisure activities.

*Mille Fiori* is a good game from a great designer who doesn't look like he's slowing down anytime soon and while I'm happy to sit down at the table and spoon it into my face I can't help but feel that he's burned the garlic a bit. 🧄

**BEN MADDOX**

## PLAY IT? MAYBE

Its reliance on innate human skills might make it a frustrating play for those that don't possess them.



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Game board
- ▶ 110 Cards
- ▶ 120 Transparent rhomboid pieces
- ▶ 4 Ship pieces
- ▶ 4 Scoring markers

## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED BLUE LAGOON

A Knizia game that is even simpler than this but, somehow, deeper and more rewarding.





# SKULL CANYON SKI FEST

Ticket to slide

**Designer:** Jason Klinke & Kip Noschese | **Publisher:** Pandasaurus Games



This light set-collection/route-claiming title from Pandasaurus Games puts players on the precarious slopes of the recently reopened Skull Canyon Ski Resort. Over three days, two to four skiers will be competing to net the most points by tackling the mountain's various runs, and gaining fame for doing so with style. In the evenings, players will relax in the village and make vital preparations for next day's competition. Come sundown on the third day, a victor will be declared based on their scored runs, collected gear, fame, and majorities held on the three tiers of slopes.

With just two actions out of the available three being chosen each turn, *Skull Canyon Ski Fest's* pace matches its adrenaline pumping theme well. Whether they are catching a lift up the mountain, drawing slope cards, or descending a run, players turns will whip back and forth with momentum sustaining speed, ensuring that everyone remains invested in the gameplay.

Central to the experience are the aforementioned slope cards. Each card in this huge deck will be one of three colours and depict one of the five 'style' icons. To claim a run, a number of cards with either matching colours or styles must be played depending on its difficulty – usually two, four, or seven. Doing so will reward players' with points, fame, and a place on the 'run scoreboard'. 'Claiming' these runs on the scoreboard is important, as having a majority will grant extra points at the end of the game. Oftentimes though, this will involve 'stealing' a run and require playing an extra card for every player token already there.

Mechanically, this is nothing new: The card play has near enough been directly imported from *Ticket to Ride* – right down to the 'wild' Yeti cards. But nonetheless, *Skull Canyon Ski Fest* deserves credit for making familiar mechanics feel fresh and undeniably suited to its chosen theme.



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Game board
- ▶ Run scoreboard
- ▶ First player marker
- ▶ Daylight tracker
- ▶ Yeti meeple
- ▶ 120 Slope cards
- ▶ 16 Gear cards
- ▶ 4 Skier meeples
- ▶ 4 Skier cards
- ▶ 4 Victory trackers
- ▶ 64 Claim markers
- ▶ 12 Fame tokens
- ▶ 8 Explosive tokens
- ▶ 8 Lift Ticket tokens
- ▶ 7 Weather markers
- ▶ 10 Style bonus markers



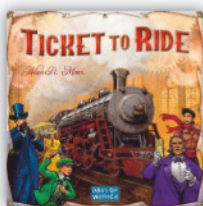
Further distancing itself from an unfair dismissal as 'Ticket to Ride with ski goggles' is the game's brief foray into worker-placement mechanics. This occurs at the end of days one and two, as players make their way to Ski Village to wind down and stock up. Here, players will advance through the village at whatever pace they choose, stopping on spaces to pay for various actions. Play will always pass to whoever is furthest back in the village but they may never return to spaces already passed, meaning that players *can* rush ahead to certain actions but at the risk of giving your opponents several turns in a row. Actions range from gaining fame or slope cards, as well as powerful ability granting 'Gear' cards which are worth points at the end of the game. Unfortunately, with this Apres-Ski phase occurring only twice throughout the game, gear cards often see little to no use. On the other hand though, the phase pushes

players to cautiously and strategically weigh up how best to utilise these scarce village actions, adding some unexpected crunch to the game.

Elsewhere, strategy lies in how best to use yeti cards to block runs and trigger avalanches, but mainly comes through in assessing the board-state and identifying the optimum course of action. There's a certain joy here in lining things up perfectly based on position, cards in hand and in the market, the yeti, and the need to steal runs – all with an eye on where this might leave you for the next turn. Thankfully though, it never becomes overwhelming, ensuring that this resort remains open to all, especially families and younger players. **CHAD WILKINSON**

## PLAY IT? YES

Fast, fun, and familiar but with a style all of its own.



## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED TICKET TO RIDE

Prefer skis to trains? Here's an option.



# APAWTHECARIA

## Animal cross-referencing

**Designer:** Anna Blackwell & Brian Tyrell | **Publisher:** Blackwell Games



Usually, I have no interest in being a vole. Or a stoat. Or any woodland creature. And yet, here, my begrudgingly helpful hedgehog has left the forest a better place. Based on Blackwell's previous solitaire potion-making game *Apothecaria*, *Apawthecaria* takes the leap into Brian Tyrell's world of critters writing prescriptions.

Players take the role of an animal whose goal is to heal the ailing of the woodland, usually by collecting roots, flowers and leaves, and then creating a concoction as a treatment. It's a journaling game that directs players to reflect on their experiences through the woodland (and beyond, there are many biomes), interacting with various creatures and situations as prompted by the book. All of the randomness is dealt with by drawing from a deck of cards, whether that's foraging (draw a number higher than the rarity) or creating an encounter (just using the number and suit from the card).

The book is the key here. The almanac – a section of the book dedicated to the plants, treatments, and processes required in your job as a GP of the undergrowth – sets it apart from other journaling games. Often journaling games feel like you should be creating either a workable piece of fiction or the lore for some future adventure. Here you're making notes. Real notes that you'll find helpful for playing the game. Soon you're flicking through the almanac like it's a useful gardening book, noting down that you need garden mint and lavender, along with where they can be found and how rare they are. I scribbled



these into my own journal (an unused diary, useful for tracking time in the game) alongside the prompt responses and notes about the notoriety of the guild, what I was carrying and so on. It flowed because the book is a part of the game. It's a key prop, and one of the pleasures is simply understanding what you're looking for. There's none of the sense of 'returning to the rulebook' here during play, because the book that happens to have the rules is also the thing you need to flick through to find out wild violet leaves are good for curing the 'sense' keyword. Soon you're working out from the almanac contents what you think might be around you in this season, and it's a kind of productive guessing game.

Of course, you're against the clock – you can't leave a squirrel with a headache for too long after all. And you might not forage what you need, and

the inhabitants nearby might not want to barter in a friendly way. Plus, there is, and forgive me for saying this, 'fun inventory management'. You need to think about what you're going to keep in your bag for longer trips and later into the year, or overloading yourself.

And beyond the fact that this is all so immersive, is that it naturally draws out short, tender interactions without being wishy-washy. There's something in the fact that the ailments can be dire and deadly that makes the 'work' in the game a little more gallows humour than soft focus feeling-fests. A perfectly pitched solo adventure that might give you paws for thought. 🐾

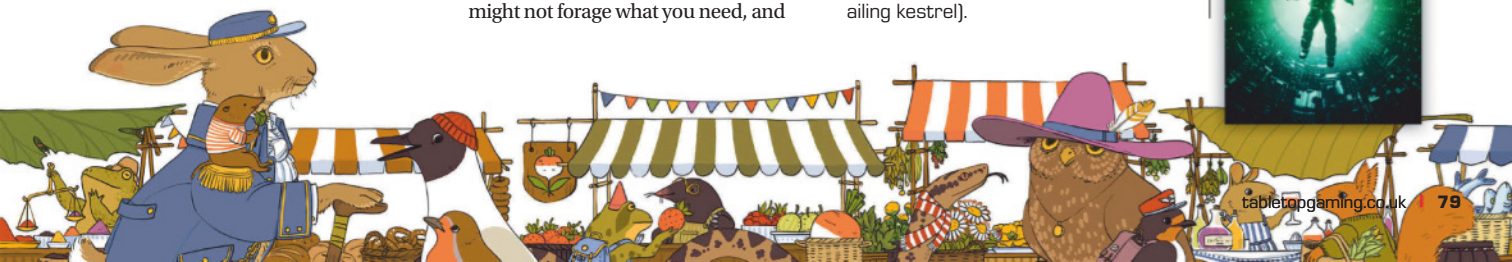
**CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT**

### PLAY IT? MUST-PLAY

A deep game of exploration that will have you stopping to smell the flowers (before picking them for parts in an attempt to stave off the death of an ailing kestrel).

### TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED THE WRETCHED...

If you enjoyed the certain doom of this card-driven solo dying-in-space game, then helpfully averting threats in the forest will be surprisingly similar, if a little more relaxed.





# POWER FAILURE

## Carbon upsetting

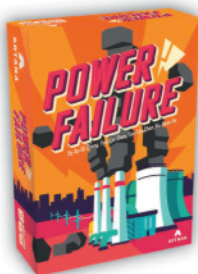
**Designer:** An-Qi Zheng, Yen-Lin Chen, Tao-Tao Chen, Yu-Xuan Su | **Publisher:** Artana



**P**ower Failure is a quirky fusion of two genres: a resource management card game, and a dexterity game. Before we get into the sordid business of whether the combo works or not, this sort of experimentation is always laudable – from the bizarre shove-a-ha’penny-meets-stock-exchange experience of *Safranito* to the programmable actions in a 3D miniatures skirmish of *Colt Express*, old flavours are often granted new life when set alongside each other.

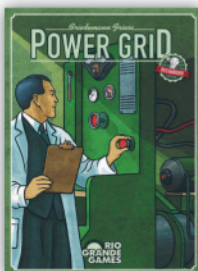
Here, we have a dash of *Power Grid* stirred into a highball glass of *Jenga*. Each turn, you’re going to grab a card from a tableau that features various types of power plants, specific resources like uranium, or one-off event cards that give you bonuses. Then you’re going to play a card from your hand. Finally, you may activate one type of power plant to generate energy. If you can generate enough energy to power one of the cities displayed in the top row, you claim that card and you’ll score the indicated victory points at the end of the game.

But there’s a wrinkle – a thrilling, dexterity-based wrinkle. Ooh! Every time you build a new power station, and whenever you generate energy using dirty, non-renewable sources, you must add blocks to the Carbon Tower. This is a stack of grey wooden hexagons that players build in the



### WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 31 Power plant action cards
- ▶ 13 Event action cards
- ▶ 15 Resource action cards
- ▶ 15 City cards
- ▶ 4 Player mats
- ▶ 3 Power cubes
- ▶ 24 Carbon blocks



middle of the table, representing both a plume of black smoke rising into the sky and, symbolically, accumulating carbon. If you knock it over at any point during your turn, your turn ends immediately and every player discards a card.

Power stations that use renewable energy like wind turbines and solar panels don’t require you to add blocks to the Carbon Tower but the power they offer is unreliable – some turns, they give you nothing. Coal power stations are easy to activate but they churn out lots of blocks which you then have to deal with – no problem if other players aren’t being reckless polluters too, but quickly impossible to sustain if you’re all adding to the tower turn after turn.

Except *everyone* gets punished when the tower collapses, which is thematically consistent – windfarm investors have to share a planet with coal power station conglomerates – but a bit rough on anyone trying to play it safe. In the end, *Power Failure* rewards churning out exactly as much carbon as you can get away with and letting your more responsible rivals

share the burden.

Both the card game and the dexterity aspects of *Power Failure* are only adequate rather than being interesting in and of themselves. Acquiring cards feels rather slow and linear. The event cards are balanced but not terribly exciting, allowing for extra draws, discounts on the resources a power station requires, or ignoring part of the carbon cost of activation. Players are rewarded for specialising, since you can only activate one type of plant each round. (though renewable plants generate energy without requiring an activation action)

Similarly, there’s not much to the dexterity portion. Whereas in something like *Rhino Hero* or even classic *Jenga* you’re managing a variety of shapes and angles, here you’re just stacking identical small hexagons. Yes, it gets harder as the tower gets higher, but there’s zero variety and little opportunity for finesse.

True, adding an extra two carbon blocks to the stack when you activate your natural gas power plant is *quite* exciting, and it’s often a gamble seeing if you can generate enough energy to swipe a big scoring city card without toppling the whole stack and losing your chance. The card mechanics work well enough. It’s just that this game’s competently executed but unspectacular parts don’t synergise to create something more.

*Power Failure* is a diverting, unusual game, for sure. Some groups may really warm to it. It plays in under an hour and comes in a small box – both pluses. It just feels, tantalisingly, as if it might be a few tweaks, a few final innovations, from being truly memorable. 🍷

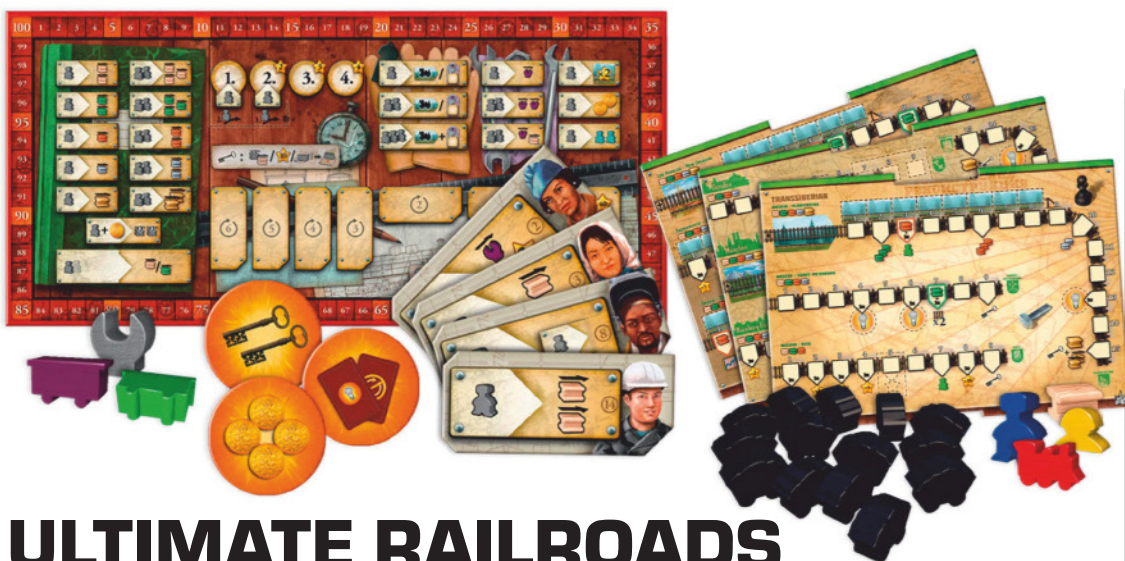
**TIM CLARE**

**PLAY IT? MAYBE**

### TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED POWER GRID

*Power Failure* is to *Power Grid* as *Pocket Mars* is to *Terraforming Mars* – that is to say, a much quicker, markedly worse – but not dreadful – attempt at territory covered by a classic that nonetheless offers a playable card game with a superficially similar theme.





# ULTIMATE RAILROADS

The most train game to ever exist

**Designer:** Helmut Ohley & Leonhard Orgler | **Publisher:** Z-Man Games



In an industry filled with brilliantly creative minds, it doesn't take long for a popular game to inspire a new generation of titles, becoming outdated by those refinements. *Russian Railroads* may no longer be considered the cutting edge, but for those who long for its wooden tracks and tense decisions, *Ultimate Railroads* ensures you need never look for another worker placement game again.

As a combination of literally every expansion ever released for the 2013 classic (including new expansions exclusively made for this edition) *Ultimate Railroads* is BIG. It's a good thing most of the expansions are mutually exclusive, otherwise you'd need a medieval banquet hall to set it up and a bank holiday weekend to play it.

Over a number of rounds, players will use all of their workers to expand their railroads across three different routes, with further options to also improve their trains and tracks (scoring you massive points) as well as investing in factories (which earn some points as well as powerful bonuses.)

There are intentionally limited action options, forcing players to deeply consider every placement. Do you take the engineer tile, providing you a unique action slot and potential end-game points? Or grab the temporary workers/coins that give you more actions for this round? Or

even snatch the first place position, ensuring next round you have that vital first pick? The answer is yes, all of these, but also pick one and can you stop staring at the board for twenty minutes and take your go already.

This is not a game for people who struggle making decisions. You must be confident in choosing a course of action and willing to course-correct later if that decision was wrong, otherwise games drag on like a rail replacement service. There's plenty of ways to earn points if one plan isn't panning out and sometimes your best move is doing something you might only benefit from a little, but an opponent is now shut out from their game-winning combo.

The other issue specifically with this edition, is that it really isn't designed for first timers. If you're going to be buying a game festooned with expansions, especially one that can easily take a couple of hours to play with the base game contents alone, it better be a game you know you're going to love.

For those that do enjoy the original's challenge, the rest of this box is an entire mixtape of Eurogaming delight, lovingly crafted and blasted through a boombox at your bedroom window. We have German Railroads, letting you customise your routes and further specialise your winning strategy; American Railroads, which adds a

stock board, offering an alternative investment that scoop up bonuses across everyone's turns; our last big box expansion is the all-new Asian Railroads, that expands on the game's core mechanics, replacing industry tracks with a communal industry board and letting players increase capacity for locomotives on their routes for even higher journey point potential.

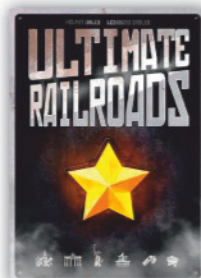
There are literally four other modules which can be added and removed to any game to increase the play space further and a solo variant (where Emil the dog randomly blocks actions as you race to beat your own high score.) It's clear the designers for this edition went wholeheartedly for supporting invested fans and I can completely respect that.

If you love the original, consider this a first-class upgrade that will have you delightfully deliberating for decades. For those willing to take on a slightly antiquated game at a steep price, this is still an absolutely solid title that can deliver satisfying moments of decision crunching fun. 🚂

**MATTHEW VERNALL**

## PLAY IT? YES

If you can, find a way to play *Russian Railroads* first. If you love that, then buying this may be one of the best value for money gaming purchases ever. Absolutely chock full of worker placement magic



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Game Board
- ▶ 8 Player boards
- ▶ 12 Additional boards
- ▶ 27 Wooden workers
- ▶ 4 Wooden locomotives
- ▶ 15 Wooden maintenance cars
- ▶ 11 Wooden wrenches
- ▶ 4 Wooden pawns
- ▶ 48 Wooden tracks
- ▶ 25 Wooden coal wagons
- ▶ 312 Cardboard tokens
- ▶ 52 Game cards

## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED GREAT WESTERN TRAIL

It's clear to see that *Great Western Trail* was inspired by the frantic route building design of *Ultimate Railroads*. If you prefer a game more focused on the building over the journey, *Ultimate Railroads* delivers in absolute spades.





# MYSTHEA

Don't myth out on this one

**Designer:** Martino Chiacchiera & Marta Ciaccasassi | **Publisher:** Tabula Games



There are good looking games and then there is *Mysthea*. Artist Travis Anderson painted a hauntingly stunning world that is both magical and futuristic but also distinctly otherworldly. The game's artwork is at the forefront of every element, ensuring it is showcased to the fullest potential. To give the artwork its space to breathe, the game ties all of its rules and abilities to iconology, which at first can feel a little overwhelming. All abilities are covered in the rulebook and reference sheet, but it can feel a little clumsy to have to check them for every card. Yet the icons are fairly intuitive and easy to remember, requiring players to turn for assistance less and less as the game progresses. Ultimately, a little of initial discomfort is worth the staggering visual feast that *Mysthea* creates when all of its components are laid out on the table.

Designers Marta Ciaccasassi and Martino Chiacchiera had quite a task to ensure that their gameplay could reach the high bar set by the visual presence of the game. To their credit, they have stuck the landing.

In *Mysthea*, players are vying for the control of the five floating islands and are occasionally teaming up together to fight powerful primordial monsters. Many rules of area control games remain true *Mysthea*. Superior strength in numbers tends to win both in combat and for the control of the territories. Spreading yourself too thin may be risky but having access to resources of several territories could provide a valuable boost in victory points. However, *Mysthea* also breaks many area-control staples, becoming a much better game for it.

Despite its initial impression, *Mysthea* is not a combat heavy game. Units are mainly used to get a foothold in territories. Even though players can try to kick out an unwelcome intruder through combat, in many cases their forces are much better spent elsewhere. For example, in joining the aforementioned intruder so together they can take



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Game board
- ▶ Events board
- ▶ 5 Floating islands
- ▶ 5 Player boards
- ▶ 7 Champion miniatures
- ▶ 4 Monster miniatures
- ▶ 20 Golem miniatures
- ▶ 40 Troop miniatures
- ▶ 7 Champion cards
- ▶ 4 Monster cards
- ▶ 5 Regional cards
- ▶ 1 Storm card
- ▶ 5 Attunement cards
- ▶ 30 Encounter cards
- ▶ 80 Command cards
- ▶ 5 Game summary cards
- ▶ 60 Tokens
- ▶ 5 Glory cubes
- ▶ 65 Coloured bases
- ▶ 5 Card references



down one of the monsters. The combat mechanics are quite bland: compare the number of units, play cards to boost your power and biggest strength value wins.

This makes combat the least interesting aspect of the game, which normally would be a negative, but here makes the game more interesting by incentivising players to seek out other, less aggressive, strategies to earn victory points.

*Mysthea* is also incredibly dynamic. Here, the tactic of turtling up – taking control of an area and defending it with most of your forces – won't work. During the *Mysthea*'s eras (rounds), each terrain is worth a different amount of victory points. A forest that may have earned you a juicy eight victory points last round, might only be worth half this much in the current era. Therefore, players will need to constantly manoeuvre their forces to take a more advantageous position. In addition, your champion – your most powerful mini on the map – may want to complete encounters, which give victory points and other bonuses. The encounter token moves after every activation, ensuring that your champion is always island-hopping chasing after them. You may also



want to place your forces in position (or maybe get them out of the way) of the monsters, whose movement patterns are always known. Finally, you can swap islands around because what is the fun of having floating islands if you can't fly them where you want? Add to that various card powers that give bonus actions and special abilities to players and units, and you have a game board always in motion. This dynamism is only slowed down by the downtime between players' turns, which feels more pronounced the more players are in the game. Yet, even with those stops and starts, the hours of *Mysthea* fly by. It's easy to be tempted to return to this universe that offers both a visual spectacle and a gameplay that is not afraid to break away from established boundaries. ●

**ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA**

## PLAY IT? YES

*Mysthea* is masterclass of world-building through art, but its merits do not rely on looks only, supported by dynamic and challenging gameplay.

## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED RUINATION

If you liked your area control games to have a distinct sense of style, you can't go wrong with the otherworldliness of *Mysthea* and end-of-word-iness of *Ruinatation*.





# IDVS MARTII

Casual Caesarial conspiracy

Designer: Miguel Bruque | Publisher: 2Tomatoes Games



**B**etrayal is one of the juicier options when it comes to board game themes, and there are few world events so linked with the idea as the assassination of Julius Caesar. For those of you who haven't watched a Shakespearian tragedy recently, this is the story of an emperor being murdered by a cloud of conspirators, on a day known as The Ides of March. In Latin that translates to "IDVS MARTII"; the name of this compact card game from 2Tomatoes Games.

*IDVS MARTII* is a hidden role game for 5-8 players, where each person has to decide whether to be Loyal, Traitors or Merchants – the latter being solely concerned with the most financially beneficial option. Over a number of turns, spread over two rounds, they secretly select cards, which nudge factions towards victory... or ruin.

So far this will be very familiar to fans of other hidden role stalwarts like *The Resistance* or *Secret Hitler*. However, somewhat unusually for the genre, players get a choice about which faction they side with – and they don't have to make that decision

straight away. Players are dealt two faction cards, and discard one during the first round. This allows them to see the flow of the game before picking a team, adding extra uncertainty to the web of conspiracy.

Another way *IDVS MARTII* manages to be inventive is the scoring track – on the unhelpfully named SVFFRAGIVM card – where the Traitor and Loyal factions slowly advance in points based on the actions of players. The highest score wins; unless the score crosses a certain point, causing an instant loss for that faction. This creates a challenge; do you push for a Loyal victory, but in doing so leaving your faction vulnerable to a Traitor voting to push you over the edge?

Finally, having a third faction, the Merchants, is a compelling twist; they win if there is a close points finish, or if a faction

scores too highly but has no players actually siding with it.

Overall *IDVS MARTII* is an interesting package, although the use of Latin throughout is thematic but not very helpful. For example, each turn, different players are assigned actions where they become CONSVL, PRAETOR or EDIL EVRVL; at no point is any context or explanation given for these names. The SVFFRAGIVM



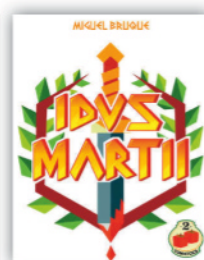
refers to the process of buying power in provincial Roman government; but Google told me that, not the rules.

The linguistic decisions add to the problem of a lacklustre rules sheet – it took us two full games to really understand exactly the purpose of the game, and what our tactics should be with each faction. The rules desperately needs an extra couple of paragraphs to be read aloud to players so they know what their aim in the game is.

Problems aside, this is a fun and tactical social game which most game groups will enjoy. With the benefit of clearer rules, I could see it becoming a favourite around many tables. **CHRIS LOWRY**

## PLAY IT? MAYBE

Conspiracy with your companions is hard to argue with. For the right group, this could be a repeated favourite. Especially if they all speak Latin.



## WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

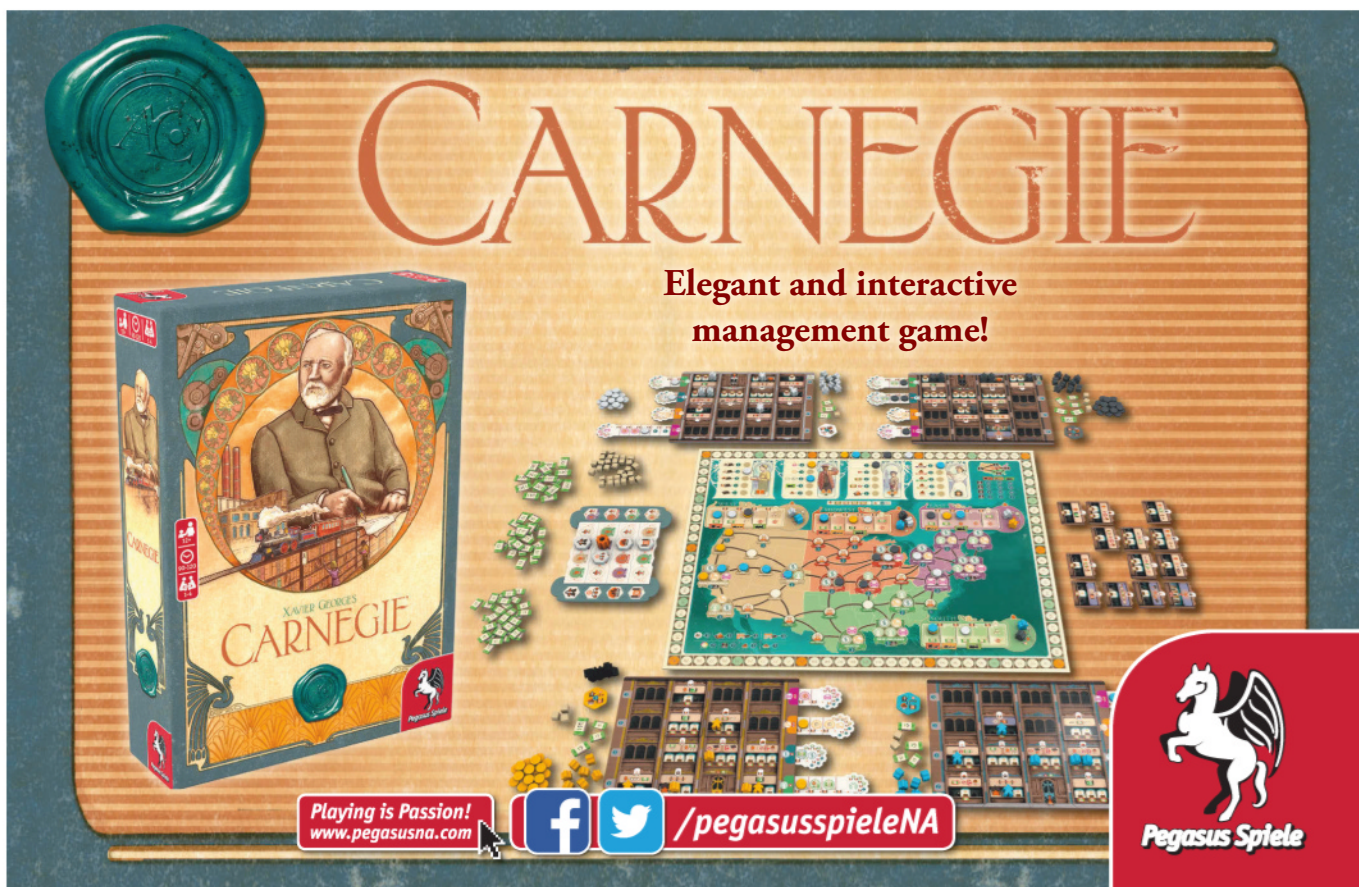
- ▶ 27 Cards
- ▶ 2 Traitors and Caesars tokens

## TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED COUP...

...*Coup* manages many of the same feelings of hidden uncertainty, but adds the ability for player-on-player attacks and the ability to play with as few as three players.







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# PAINTING GUIDE

## STAR WARS LEGION: SHADOW COLLECTIVE

We dip into the dark side for this Star Wars Legion painting guide

Words and photographs by **Andy Leighton**



### PAINTS & TECHNIQUES

- » Abaddon Black
- » Administratum Grey
- » Averland Sunset
- » Baharroth Blue
- » Bugman's Glow
- » Cadian Fleshtone
- » Celestra Grey
- » Dark Reaper
- » Dawnstone
- » Doombull Brown
- » Dorn Yellow
- » Drakenhof Nightshade
- » Evil Sunz Scarlet
- » Fenrisian Grey
- » Fire Dragon Bright
- » Flash Gitz Yellow
- » Gal Vorbak Red
- » Incubi Darkness
- » Ironbreaker
- » Iron Warrior
- » Khorne Red
- » Kislev Flesh
- » Leadbelcher
- » Martian Ironearth
- » Mephiston Red
- » Mournfang Brown
- » Nuln Oil
- » Pallid Wych Flesh
- » Rakarth Flesh
- » Russ Grey
- » Skavenblight Dingo
- » Steel Legion Drab
- » Tau Light Ochre
- » Temple Guard Blue
- » Thondia Brown
- » Thunderhawk Blue
- » Troll Slayer Orange
- » Ushabti Bone
- » Wazdakka Red
- » White Scar
- » Wild Rider Red
- » Zandri Dust

Each model is split up into 4 stages, each with a list of colours and the corresponding paint that was used for it. Each stage uses a different technique to achieve a similar effect on each element but with different colours. Normally we would start with an undercoat using a spray but these minis come primed and ready to paint.

**Stage 1** is basecoating. Base colours are applied using flat, solid colours covering an area completely. Sometimes this can take 2-3 coats to achieve that flat, solid colour. Make sure to apply several thin coats, rather than one thick coat.

**Stage 2** is layering. This stage involves applying a layer of a lighter colour, leaving the recesses, such as the folds in cloth, the darker basecoat colour. Sometimes we will apply a thinned layer. This involves adding a thinner, most commonly water or Lahmian Medium, to the paint. This is then applied over several coats, gradually building a gradient between the basecoat and the layer.

**Stage 3** is highlighting. We use several methods to highlight, including a layered highlight, line and edge. A layered highlight is very similar to the thinned layer, but is

only applied to the raised areas and edges. A line highlight involves applying a thin line of paint to the raised areas and straight edges of the area. An edge highlight is very similar, except that it is only applied to the hard edges.

**Stage 4** is for final details and highlights. This stage involves adding the finishing touches, sometimes just small details like the eyes, or adding small highlights to increase definition. If you find yourself unsure of where to apply the highlights or spot highlights, look over the images alongside the guide and compare that stage to the last.



### DARTH MAUL



#### STAGE 1

**Skavenblight Dingy:** Apply a layer to the robes and skin.  
**Iron Warrior:** Apply a basecoat to the metals; the legs, lightsaber/Darksaber hilt, belt and wrist fastenings.  
**Khorne Red:** Apply a basecoat to chest and face markings. touch up any mistakes with a light amount of Abaddon Black.  
**Thondia Brown:** Apply a basecoat to the upper legs and arms.  
**Steel Legion Drab:** Apply a basecoat to the horns.



#### STAGE 2

**Dawnstone:** Apply a thinned highlight to the robes and skin.  
**Drakenhof Nightshade:** Apply a shade to the metals.  
**Wazdakka Red:** Apply a layer to the markings.  
**Mournfang Brown:** Apply a layer to the upper legs and arms.  
**Zandri Dust:** Apply a layer to the horns and teeth.  
**White Scar:** Apply a layer to the eyes.



#### STAGE 3

**Administratum Grey:** Apply a thinned spot highlight to the robes and skin.  
**Leadbelcher:** Apply a layer to the metals.  
**Evil Sunz Scarlet:** Apply a line highlight to the markings.  
**Steel Legion Drab:** Apply a line highlight to the upper legs and arms.  
**Pallid Wych Flesh:** Apply a layer to the horns and teeth.  
**Troll Slayer Orange:** Apply a spot to the centre of the eyes.



#### STAGE 4

**Ironbreaker:** Apply a spot highlight to the metals.  
**Wild Rider Red:** Apply a spot highlight to the markings.  
**White Scar:** Apply a spot highlight to the horns.  
**Abaddon Black:** Apply a spot to the eyes.



# ROOK KAST

## DARKSABER

### STAGE 1

**Dawnstone:** Apply a highlight along the edge of the blade. Also add small dashes, at differing angles, towards the blade edge.

### STAGE 2

**Celestra Grey:** Apply another highlight along the edge of the blade, as well as building up the dashes.

### STAGE 3

**White Scar:** Apply a very thin line along the blade edge and slightly up into the dashes.

## LIGHTSABER

### STAGE 1

**Mephiston Red:** Apply a basecoat

### STAGE 2

**Evil Sunz Scarlet:** Apply a layer to the blade, working from the emitter up.

### STAGE 3

**Wild Rider Red:** Apply a layer just around the emitter.



### STAGE 1

**Skavenblight Ding:** Apply a layer to the undersuit.

**Gal Vorbak Red:** Apply a basecoat to the armour and main body of the jetpack.

**Leadbelcher:** Apply a basecoat to the metals; the guns, top and bottom of the jetpack and belt.

**Tau Light Ochre:** Apply a basecoat to the shoulder clasps.

**Bugman's Glow:** Apply a basecoat to the skin.

**Incubi Darkness:** Apply a basecoat to the hair.

### STAGE 2

**Dawnstone:** Apply a thinned highlight to the undersuit and straps.

**Doombull Brown:** Apply a thinned highlight to the armour and main body of the jetpack.

**Mephiston Red:** Apply a layer to the lining of the leg guard, shoulder and wrist armour.

**Nuln Oil:** Apply a shade to the metals as well as in the grooves found on the leg guards.

**Averland Sunset:** Apply a layer to the shoulder clasps.

**Cadian Fleshstone:** Apply a layer to the skin.

**Dark Reaper:** Apply a layer to the hair.

### STAGE 3

**Administratum Grey:** Apply a thinned spot highlight to the undersuit and straps.

**Bugman's Glow:** Apply a line highlight to the armour.

**Evil Sunz Scarlet:** Apply a highlight to the lining of the leg guard, shoulder and wrist armour.

**Drakenhof Nightshade:** Apply a shade to the metals.

**Flash Gitz Yellow:** Apply a line highlight to the shoulder clasps.

**Kislev Flesh:** Apply a highlight to the skin.

**Russ Grey:** Apply a line highlight to the hair.

### STAGE 4

**Rakarth Flesh:** Apply a thinned spot highlight to the armour.

**Wild Rider Red:** Apply a spot highlight to the lining of the leg guards, shoulder and wrist armour.

**Ironbreaker:** Apply a layer to the metals.

**Dorn Yellow:** Apply a spot highlight to the shoulder clasps.

**Ushabti Bone:** Apply a spot highlight to the skin.

**Fenrisian Grey:** Apply a spot highlight to the hair.



### MANDALORIAN SUPER COMMANDOS



#### STAGE 1

**Skavenblight Dingy:** Apply a layer to the undersuit and straps.  
**Dark Reaper:** Apply a layer to the armour.  
**Khorne Red:** Apply a basecoat to the armour detailing.  
**Leadbelcher:** Apply a basecoat to the metals; guns, belts, top and bottom of the jetpack and horns.



#### STAGE 2

**Dawnstone:** Apply a thinned line highlight to the undersuit and straps.  
**Thunderhawk Blue:** Apply a thinned layer to the armour focussing on the top and side edges.  
**Wazdakka Red:** Apply a thinned layer to the armour detailing.  
**Nuln Oil:** Apply a shade to the metals.



#### STAGE 3

**Administratum Grey:** Apply a thinned spot highlight to the undersuit and straps.  
**Russ Grey:** Apply a line highlight to the edges of the armour.  
**Evil Sunz Scarlet:** Apply a line highlight to the armour detailing.  
**Drakenhof Nightshade:** Apply a shade to the metals.



#### STAGE 4

**Fenrisian Grey:** Apply a spot highlight to the armour.  
**Wild Rider Red:** Apply a spot highlight to the armour detailing.  
**Ironbreaker:** Apply a layer to the metals.



## JET PACK FLAMES



### STAGE 1

**Dorn Yellow:** Apply a basecoat.



### STAGE 2

**Fire Dragon Bright:** Mix with around 4 parts water and apply a glaze to the bottom three quarters of the flames. Once dry apply a second glaze to the bottom half.



### STAGE 3

**Wild Rider Red:** Mix with around 4 parts water and apply a glaze to the bottom third of the flames. Once dry apply another coat to the tip of the flames.

# BASES



### STAGE 1

**Temple Guard Blue:** Apply a basecoat.



### STAGE 2

**Martian Ironearth:** Apply a fairly thick layer across the base and allow to dry for 1-2 hours.



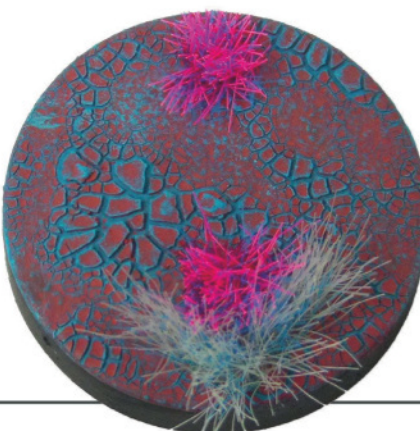
### STAGE 3

**Temple Guard Blue:** Apply a drybrush.



### STAGE 4

**Baharroth Blue:** Apply a light drybrush.



### STAGE 5

**Green Stuff World  
Martian Tufts - Neon  
Yeti Blue and Andromeda  
Pink:** Apply tufts to the bases, cutting them down in size if necessary.





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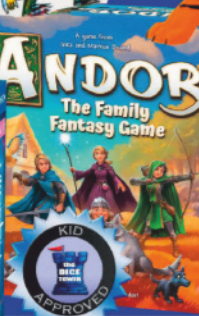


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**September 2022**

**BROTHERWISE GAMES**



## RAINY DAY GAMES

# GODS

We bring you a smorgasbord of roleplaying tools and ephemera,  
this month: **GODS**

Who Made This? **Rainy Day Games** are a collective of indie games designers comprising of **Anna Blackwell** (*DELVE, Apothecaria*), **Chris Bisette** (*The Wretched, Treasures of the Troll King*), **Jack Harrison** (*Artefact, Orbital*), and **Matt Sanders** (*Sealed Library, Have You Heard About The Beast?*)

### D20 COMMANDMENTS

And so sayeth the GOD these COMMANDMENTS!  
And ye, they were a bit weird but we do as we're told!  
Roll 3D20 to determine the commandments of this religion.  
First roll determines if Thou Shalt or Shalt Not, second roll determines the action, and the third roll determines the when.

1	Thou Shalt	Eat the flesh of pigs	On a full moon
2		Wear sparkly garments	During religious ceremonies
3		Take the life of another	Before marriage
4		Steal from another	If you really want to
5		Delve beneath the ground	On certain holy days
6		Leave the holy lands	On the solstices
7		Pray to our GOD	When told to
8		Burn offerings of grain	After a disaster
9		Practice magick in any form	When danger lurks unseen
10		Slaughter mighty beasts	When hunger looms
11	Thou Shalt Not	Permit the worship of other gods	At night
12		Bathe thyself	No matter what
13		Eat of the sacred food	If a priest is present
14		Sing songs of praise	During uncertain times
15		Harm thyself	After misdeeds
16		Be faithful to thy partner	Always/ Ever
17		Hide thy true face	When near strangers
18		Dance	When anyone is watching
19		Keep secrets	When alone
20		Permit the spread of disease	With a few exceptions

Generate Ten Commandments and you'll have plenty to springboard your new **cult** religion.

Some of them might seem a little strange but use that as a way to brainstorm ideas about the history of this cult. Why might there be a few exceptions to "thou shalt not hide thy true face" or why might they be commanded to "dance when near strangers"?

And of course, consider what punishments are meted out for breaking these important commandments. Is it hellfire and damnation all the way or something more interesting and nuanced?

### D10 SIGNS FROM THE SKY

The gods rarely speak to us in clear terms, so here's a list of omens you can use instead.

1. Briary tendrils enwrap the house of a carpenter, choking walls and doors in a mass of thorns. The stems are thick with ashen blooms that stink of rotting flesh.
2. The skies above turn pitch dark in an instant, and beads of colour and light course between the stars to form a new constellation of unmistakable significance.
3. An enormous crow swoops down, landing heavily upon a shoulder. In its beak it holds a clutch of finger bones that move in tandem with the hand that belongs to its mortal perch.
4. Blood runs from the eyes of a faithful cleric, pooling on the ground to form a triptych of symbols—an animal, a flower and a blade.
5. A salt shaker is carelessly knocked over, its grains spilling into the crude resemblance of a recognisable face.
6. A hail of finger-width snakes rains from the sky, each hissing the same protracted phrase in a sibilant cacophony as they writhe in chaotic distress.
7. An apple, eaten mindlessly while contemplating a decision, reveals within it a core of golden seeds tarnished by the heat of a great fire. They are still warm to the touch.
8. A mother gives birth to an adult man, whose silvery hair and amber eyes accentuate his otherworldly manners. His accent is unfamiliar, and he speaks of nothing but the terrible future he claims to have witnessed.
9. All of the cats in the local area leap up to the rooftops in skittish fright, refusing to come down. Wide-eyed and arch-backed, they all stare towards the same point in the empty sky.
10. The sun turns black and twice as hot, scalding the land with its shadowy heat as wildfires illuminate the heavens.



## D6 BARGAINS WITH SMALL GODS

Small Gods of old. Mostly Forgotten and nostalgic for times that likely never existed. They whisper bargains into the ears of those who seek adventure, offering great power in exchange for small acts

1. "Tis but a trifle. Take the horseshoe down from above the doorway. What does the horseshoe do? Why it keeps me out of their house. No, it doesn't matter who they are. Such a simple task a child could do it, and in return you'll have great sway over them."
2. "A simple task. The statue in the square. Scratch out its eyes. Damned fool won't be able to keep such a close eye on us with their eyes scratched out I'd warrant. Once it's done I'll be able to help you sneak into anywhere, and I do mean anywhere."
3. "Dig. DIG. Dig more and then keep digging. The bastards buried the idol of me in a lead coffin forty feet down. We'll make them pay and you can keep their pathetic mortal playthings."
4. "There's a clearing in the woods with four standing stones. Clear away the ivy and redraw the lines. No creature in those woods will bear you ill will from that day forward."
5. "Atop the peak of the tallest mountain in the west lies my shrine. Relight the beacons on the solstice and I will guide your way under the night skies for evermore. Oh, and slay the abominable beast that has made its nest there. How abominable? I'm not sure."
6. "You know, the usual stuff, sour milk, gout that won't go away, pebbles in your boot, a chill draft under a door, the kind of stuff a farmer moans about. All yours in exchange for a cheese wheel and some seasonal fruit, let at the cave entrance on a full moon."



## D12 SUPERSTITIONS

Whether they're related to the unknowable workings of the gods or not, no fantasy world is complete without weird and wonderful superstitions. Their origins are left unexplored, shrouded in mystery so that your players will inevitably ask you, "where the hell does that come from?!"



1. Do with these as you will. Perhaps they are all completely true. Maybe they're all utter nonsense. Maybe the truth is somewhere in the middle, buried under centuries of retelling and miscommunication. Only you know for sure.
2. Signing a contract before the sun has risen will bring bad fortune upon everyone involved in the deal.
3. When sleeping under the stars, using the same site twice is a sure-fire way to find yourself stolen away by fairies,
4. Finding a snake coiled around itself foretells the coming of a danger you have faced before.
5. Burying the last ember from your fire will give you luck in your travels.
6. When the stars fall, it is a good time to ask your god for a favour.
7. Inhaling the last smoke of a dying fire summons the spirits of the fire, who are bound to give you aid as long as you hold the smoke within your lungs.
8. When it rains on a sunny day, tragedy is waiting to fall.
9. It is bad luck to leave the first footsteps in fresh snow.
10. Never pick blue berries that grow near rowan trees. They are made from the blood of gods, and eating them means death to mortals.
11. Sleeping beneath the canopy of a willow will fill your dreams with visions of futures that may or may not come to pass.
12. Leaving a bowl of brackish water beside your door at night wards off harmful spirits.
13. If your horse throws a shoe, danger is coming.



THE DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO ROLEPLAYING

# STAYING ON SIDE (QUESTS)

Getting sidetracked is  
the quest

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes**

**S**pare a thought, if you would, for the humble side quest.

Once upon a time, these casual little adventures, plucked from notice boards and the mouths of friendly barkeeps, were the lifeblood of a typical RPG campaign. They were a quick source of XP and gold that didn't take much effort to prepare or run - the tabletop gaming equivalent of a quick sandwich to get you through the working day.

As our campaigns start to tend towards the cinematic and dramatic, however, it becomes harder and harder to find room to slot them into our games. While videogames may be

happy to ignore the weirdness inherent in the Epic Heroes of Destiny leaving the world on the brink of the apocalypse while they grind up the best gear, we tend to expect a little more rationality to our tabletop campaigns.

As such, it just doesn't feel *right* to send the party off on a griffon-hunting quest while the paladin's father is being tortured by demons, no matter how shiny the loot might be. Similarly, we can't reasonably expect our eccentric librarians and jaded mystics to let the encroaching tentacles of Cthulhu slide for a couple of weeks while they sort out a minor cult or two.

This is, honestly, a shame.







## THE BEST OF QUESTS

Side quests might not be the most important part of a campaign, but they still bring a whole pile of benefits to a game.

If nothing else, a solid side quest can earn its keep by giving the main drama room to breathe. No story can survive with its foot jammed hard on the accelerator at all times, and a quick jaunt into the wilderness to rescue someone's missing dog or pick some herbs can add a little texture to proceedings.

Sure, it's possible to achieve some of the same effects with downtime, but a sidequest can offer the same benefits (relaxation, room for characters to speak when things aren't on fire) while still letting the players roll dice and show off combat skills.

Beyond this, a good sidequest can also work wonders when it comes to fleshing out the world. If you have a really cool idea for an underground warren filled with mole-folk, but the main plotline never really touches it, you can just throw the macguffin of the moment down there! Instantly, the players have a reason to explore and interact with all the great stuff you dreamed up.

These little adventures and mysteries can also shine a light on the ordinary people of your world – the ones who don't have enough clout to deal with mighty heroes and brave starfighters on the regular, but who might scrape together a bit of cash to get a problem solved. This can help to ground more fantastical stories and give the bleaker and

grittier ones a clear sign of just what the heroes are fighting to protect.

Finally, there's also nothing in the rulebook stating that sidequests and the characters they contain *have* to stay relegated to the fringes of the story. The tiny village that hosts a monster hunt might be the site of a key battle later in the campaign, for example. Likewise, the cartographer who needed help gathering materials might prove to be an invaluable ally when the heroes realise they need to uncover an ancient map later on in the campaign.

Everything can be interconnected.

## LEAVING ROOM

So we want more side quests. Great. But how do we get players to actually take them up?

Well, a large part of it is simply giving room for the party to go on them without it seeming absurd. Nobody is seriously going to consider a short little dungeon delve or escort request while the planet is in danger, but if they're cooling their heels for a few days in any case...

In recent games, I've had players embark on sidequests and explore the world while waiting for vital letters to be delivered, or for specialist spell components to ferment. In an airship-themed campaign, there's usually a few days' wait while the captain finishes up their business in port and sources provisions for the next step of the journey.

This free time isn't always devoted to questing, of course. Often, the players seize upon it for training, working on new gear, or

just kicking back and relaxing. If the party are keen to push on with the story and are excitedly planning the next leg of the journey, those days can be waved away with a single sentence. However, if they're looking for a bit of a break from the overarching narrative, there are always a few townsfolk in need of help and a few rumours circulating the taverns.

## POWER TO THE PEOPLE

Ultimately, one of the greatest benefits of wedging side quests into your campaign is the freedom it offers. It gives players the chance to say yes and no to adventures without worrying overly about consequences coming back to bite them or upsetting a GM who spent three weeks planning an epic campaign.

They give players a chance to muck around for a bit and characters a chance to develop and grow. Their very meaninglessness is what gives them value.

Embrace the side quest lifestyle. 🎲

## YOUR QUESTIONS, ANSWERED

Want your game mastering questions answered? Drop your questions, conundrums and roleplaying roadblocks over to us. Email the editor at: [christopher.eggett@warnersgroup.co.uk](mailto:christopher.eggett@warnersgroup.co.uk) and we will pass this on to our tamed GM.





## SHOP SPOTLIGHT

# ENTOYMENT WARGAMING AND HOBBY CENTRE

For this month's Shop Spotlight, we caught up with Peter about Entoyment Wargaming and Hobby Centre, the much recommended centre in Poole, Dorset

Interview by **Charlie Pettit**

**Can you tell us a little bit about the store?**

Entoyment is just passing its eighth Birthday this Summer and has had a really meteoric rise since its first inception. Essentially, I was aiming to run a hobby store in the local area that provided an inclusive play space, a wide range of board games, miniature games, card games and RPG's...alongside service with a smile.

Our Hobby Centre is in Poole and services the Bournemouth area with customers travelling much further afield for shopping and gaming. We have an onsite cafe and a gaming room with 20 6 x 4 tables. There was already a strong gaming community before the stores inception locally and this has grown bigger within the store and also because of the hobby's increased exposure and becoming more mainstream nationally.

**What's it like being a FLGS in your area?**

We are so proud of our local community and they have grown into exactly what we wanted them to be, fun, friendly and welcoming. They play a wide variety of games and it's always a challenge to keep up with what they are playing.

**What do you think makes your store unique?**

The range of products and gaming systems we sell is really unique, and our passion is for in stock rather than order in. Visitors from other parts of the country always comment on the breadth and depth of our range and I'd like to think we have an awesome community that newcomers feel welcomed into. Our webstore continues to grow which is great news, it shows that our footprint is widening.

**What titles have you found most popular recently?**

The popularity of games really ebbs and flows in store, but you can always rely on Warhammer and its spin offs as a consistent good performer. Moonstone is really popular at the moment and this cycles in store so there is always a flavour of the month. Board Games continue to perform well and the store is really passionate about historical gaming, so we support Warlord Games, Battlefront and Northstar ranges as well as imports such as By Fire and Sword and Blood & Plunder to keep the balance. We hold a range of gaming mats, plenty of Hobby Accessories, Paints and Books.

I personally am a fan of *Battlegroup* (WW2), *Black Powder* and Warhammer Historical for my tabletop games. My favourite board games are *Orleans*, *Agricola*, *Nusford* and *Axis and Allies*. I'm also a big fan of GMT Games, and their *Command and Colors* series is a highlight.

**Have you any favourite memories associated that you'd want to share?**

A store like Entoyment has so many memories for me and so many good people around it and it's the thought of so many more to come that drives you on. The rise of this type of store is not the work of one individual, it's the product of so many dedicated people around it and I never forget what this community has done for me and that makes me want to do better for them.

**What events do you run for the local gaming scene?**

Entoyment runs events every weekend across the gaming spectrum and we are the team behind the South Coast Series, which is a new venture for 2022 bringing high quality events to cities and towns across the South. The first one is in Bournemouth this July with the 2nd in Southampton in October. Our absolute jewel in the crown has been the rise of Beachhead which is in its 7th year this February 2023. Beachhead is a cracking Tabletop Games show which has gone from humble beginnings to being one of the largest shows on the UK Calendar.

**What's been your favourite part of running a FLGS?**

My favourite aspect of running a Tabletop Games Store is the community and I'm always inspired by their attitude towards others and their willingness to introduce others to the hobby. Entoyment is always looking to pay that back with a bigger and better venue and that's where our future plans lie. It's about being the best at what we do and I hope that our journey has brought us close to the expectations that our visitors have. 🍷

### WHERE CAN I FIND IT?

entoyment.co.uk  
Entoyment Wargaming and Hobby Centre,  
Unit 2, Fleetsbridge Business Centre,  
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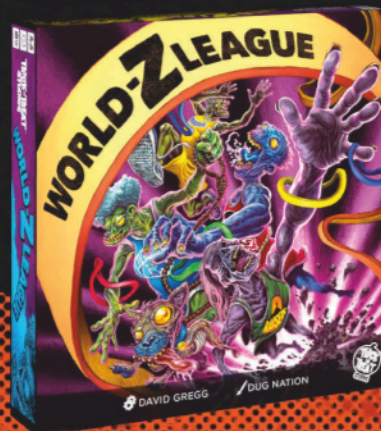
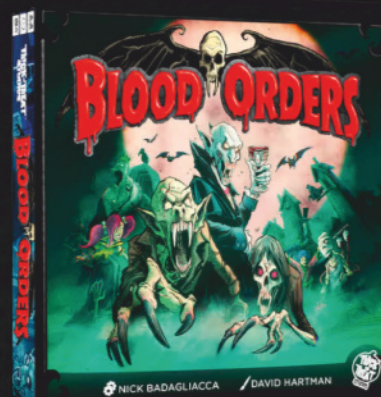
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# tabletop time machine

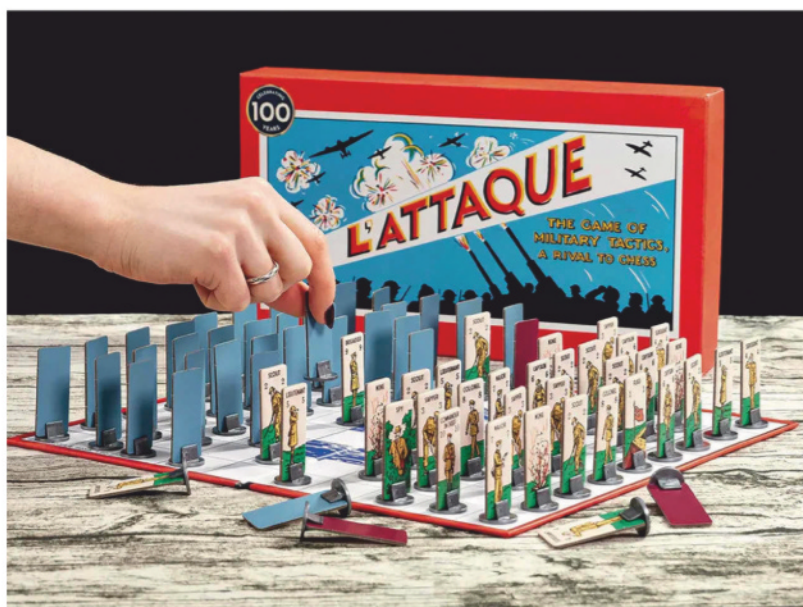
## 1909 L'ATTAQUE

**Y**ou can usually draw a clear distinction between board games and card games, but the war game *L'Attaque* and its derivatives strike me as being a perfect cross between the two. It's a board game in that pieces are arrayed on a basically squared grid, move from position to position, and attack enemy pieces, and a card game in that the individual identities of the pieces are visible only to their owner and hidden from their opponent.

You each control an army consisting of 36 vertically-mounted flat cards, so placed that the blank sides are facing your enemy. You start by arranging them however you deem fit on your four nearest ranks of a board of 9x10 squares. In descending order of value from 10 to 1 your forces consist of a Commander-in-Chief and a Brigadier General, two each of colonels and majors, four each of captains, lieutenants, sergeants and sappers, eight scouts, one flag, four mines, and a spy. You each in turn move a piece one square orthogonally. On coming back-to-back against an enemy piece you may (but need not) announce 'Attack!'. If so, both are revealed and the lower-scoring is removed from play, or, if equal, both are. The winner is the first to capture the opponent's flag.

The game was patented in France 1909 by a Parisienne, Hermance Edan. I've read that it may have been inspired by a Japanese game called *Gunjin Shogi*, of which, however, I can't (yet) find any mention earlier than mid-twentieth century. The originality of its mechanism is attested by the number of variants and derivatives it subsequently gave rise to. The best known of these is probably *Stratego*, authored by Jacques Johan Mogendorff, which was published in 1943 and has since reached international tournament status.

*L'Attaque* was also published in the UK by H P Gibson (now Gibsons Games), and was followed by in-house designed variations: a naval-themed equivalent called *Dover Patrol* (1919), *Aviation*, which speaks for itself, and the combined forces offshoot known as *Tri-Tactics* (1925). In *Playing by the Rules*, a history of Gibsons Games published in 2019, we read that these 'Big Four' games, were 'a mainstay of



H P Gibson & Sons' board games line-up, and by 1939 the company ranked alongside industry leaders such as Waddingtons, Spears, and Chad Valley'. In 1996 Gibsons re-implemented *L'Attaque* under the title *Sharpe's Attack*, based on the character of Major Richard Sharpe in Bernard Cornwell's tales of the Peninsular War of 1807-14, which had formed the subject of a popular television series on ITV. ♣



### ABOVE

A modern version of the game from Gibsons Games

### LEFT

An original advertisement

**David Parlett** is a games inventor and historian, author of *The Oxford History of Card Games* and its sequel on board games, and a visiting professor of games design at the University of Suffolk.



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